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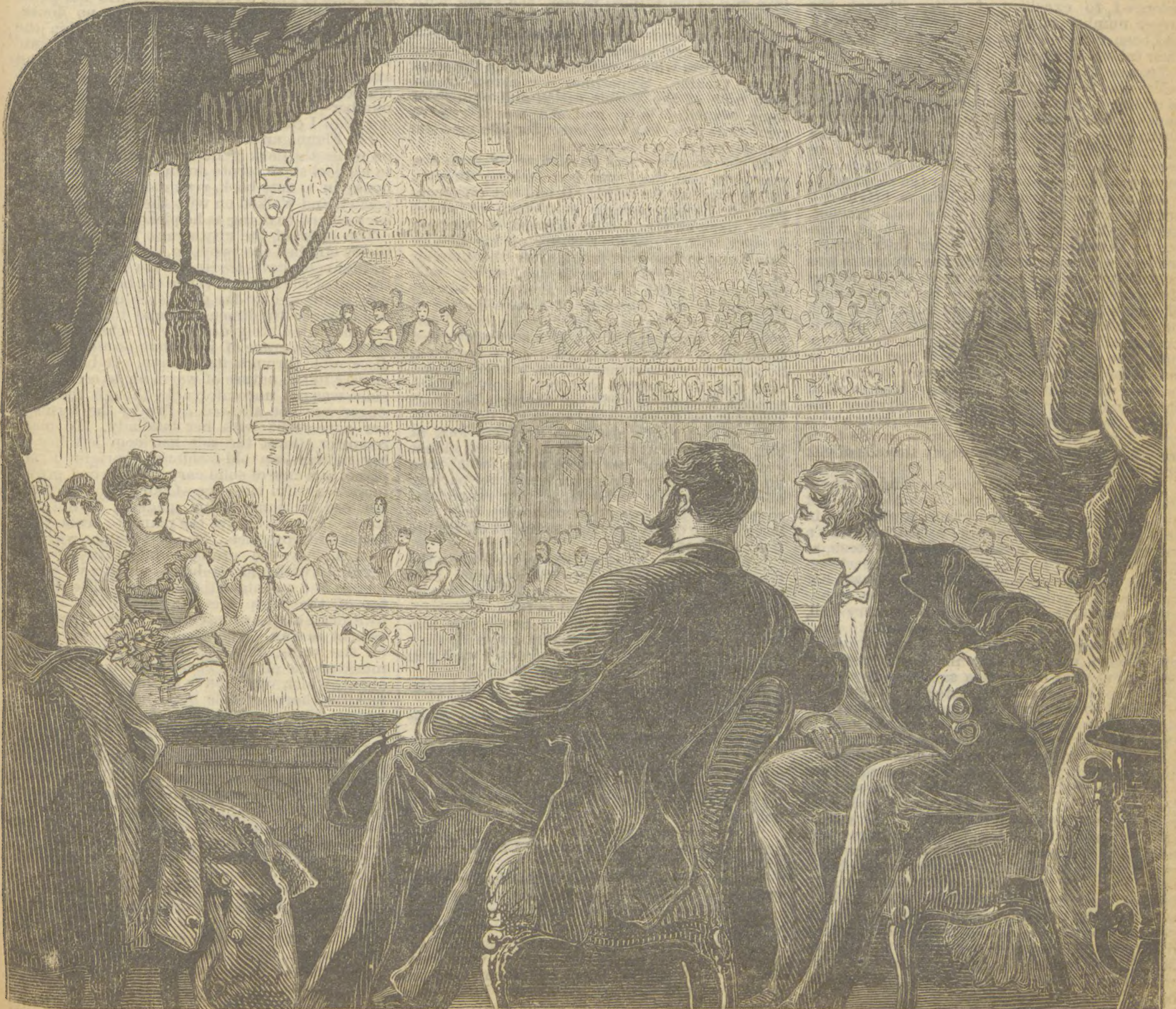
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THE MYSTERIOUS GUARDIAN; OR, LITTLE CLAIRE, THE OPERA SINGER.

BY CORINNE CUSHMAN,

AUTHOR OF "MADCAP, THE LITTLE QUAKERESS," "THE WAR OF HEARTS," "BLACK EYES AND BLUE," ETC., ETC.



CLAIRE'S LONG LASHES DROOPED, HER HEART BOUNDED; FOR BOTH WERE LOOKING DIRECTLY AT HER—EVIDENTLY TALKING OF HER.

The Mysterious Guardian;

OR,
Little Claire, the Opera Singer.

BY CORINNE CUSHMAN,
AUTHOR OF "BLACK EYES AND BLUE," "MAD-
CAP, THE LITTLE QUAKERESS," "LOOKED
HEART," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPECTATOR IN THE BOX.

"Childlike and wistful and sorrowful-eyed."

Well, there in our front-row box we sat.—BULWER.

DELIGHTFUL, enchanting mystery of the "green-room!"—like so many other mysteries not half so bewitching when you approach it closely, as when longed for but unattained!

A dozen girls were in the dressing-room of one of the opera-houses, the most of them busy with fancy-work, for the "wait" was a long one and time dragged unless they had some means of passing it away. The place was comfortable and well-lighted; Mr. Bright, the manager, was wise in his way; he saw no economy in having his girls ill with sore throat half the time for want of a warm room.

He was very strict, too; a church choir was not so protected as was his chorus—not even a lady friend could gain admittance behind the scenes unless legitimate business required; these demoiselles were his children so long as they were under the roof of his theater. Some of these girls, singing here for ten dollars a week, belonged to excellent families, though the larger number of them, it must be confessed, had been compelled by stern poverty to make their talents available.

Two or three of them were young married ladies glad to make their good voices available in adding to the slender incomes of their husbands. They made quite a picture, sitting about in the peasant costumes which the opera of the evening demanded, little white caps perched on their heads, their black slippers and scarlet stockings showing under the short petticoats, their trim waists laced up in bright-colored jackets, their hands busy with crochet, knitting, Kensington stitch, or applique, whispering to one another half under their breath, while the pulsing music of the orchestra was heard supporting the rich voice of the *prima donna* or the pathetic notes of the second tenor. The girls seemed on pleasant terms with each other, chatting about their affairs, domestic or love-affairs, as it might chance, their shopping, the horrid temper of the first tenor, or whatever came up. The *prima donna*, Alberta, "was a darling," she was so kind to all of them and "put on no airs." Altogether, the chorus, on the feminine side, were having a nice time, low chatting to each other, while their busy fingers drew out the bright threads of silk or Berlin wool.

The only one who said nothing, and to whom the others paid no attention, was the smallest and the youngest of the group, a girl who, in this short peasant costume, appeared to be a mere child—you would have said of thirteen, at the first glance; for she was not much past seventeen, and having her hair braided down her back and her crimson petticoat half-way to her knees, and being very slim and not very tall, she seemed more childish than she was.

She was crocheting a lady's sleeveless jacket, to be worn under a wrap in winter weather; she was always doing this same work, and always kept herself steadily employed during the "waits," so that her companions inferred she was making these jackets for the stores; and in this they were correct—Claire added two dollars a week to her income by this work—two dollars, which just paid for one singing lesson.

Perhaps Claire was no poorer than some of the other girls; but she was prouder and more reserved; so she was left mostly to herself, as she preferred. Then, too, the older ones could hardly be expected to like it that Claire was always put in the front rank when the chorus went on—that she was in all the dances, the bits of conversation and the most striking tableaux; but managers have a keen eye for personal beauty, and Claire was the loveliest little creature that ever appeared in a chorus. Mr. Bright would gladly have paid her twice what he did, for her face alone, had she not been able to sing a note—though he did not tell her so, nor did she dream it; and as she sung like a bird, and had grace and intelligence, he secretly valued her very highly.

Presently the fancy-work was hastily rolled up, and the girls sprung to their feet as the *prima donna* came in, flung herself down in a chair and fanned herself.

"I thought he would bite me, in the kissing scene," she panted.

"He's horrid—perfectly horrid! Cross old thing!" responded the girls; they would have liked to linger to hear more and to help Alberta change her dress, but they must go on for the scene of the "festa," and they trooped out onto the stage to meet the male chorus from the op-

erating and arrange themselves for a rustic dance; the orchestra struck up a dance measure, the curtain went up, and little Claire, along with the others, was whirling and balancing with her partner, a light-footed peasant in velvet and silver buttons.

After the dance there was some lively conversation in song. Claire was in her designated place, at the front, on the right, where the audience could admire the exquisite grace of her slim, supple figure, her feet in child's slippers, her white arms, her large, grave brown eyes with their long fringes, her lovely features and her thick-braided, glistening chestnut-brown hair, all her own.

There were scores of young fellows, every night, who tried to attract the attention of the pale, pretty young chorus-singer; they might as well have tried to "flirt" with a marble statue; Claire thought no more of them than she did of the gilded Cupids who adorned the chandelier and the carvings of the dress-circle. Her whole heart was in her work. It was the dream of her life to become a *prima donna*; the love of music was part of her being; she was a woman in ambition, but she was a child in many other things; to her, the stage, with all its hard, hard work, was a realm of fairy and enchantment—a place like no other place—a magical world apart—and the audience were mere puppets who were there to fill up the seats of the theater. Sometimes her glance would take note of the jewels, satins and plumes of some beautiful lady, and she would resolve some time to be like that lady; for the men she had never even a passing look.

As she stood on this particular evening she was quite near the lower box looking directly on the stage at the right. It had but one occupant, a foreign-looking gentleman of about forty, dark-eyed and olive-skinned, elaborately dressed, with diamonds flashing on his slender hands and in his shirt-front, after the manner of rich foreigners: a gentleman, surely, who had seen too much of the world to show any excitement at the discovery of a rare degree of loveliness in a chorus-singer; yet he leaned forward and watched Claire with a sort of startled fascination. His burning gaze drew her own, by some mysterious magnetism, to meet it; and then she, too, started and lost color, while a strange, tremulous thrill ran through her fresh young voice, threatening to break it down.

Twice and thrice she stole a covert look at him who stared at her so hard, at every glance growing paler and her voice more faint; then the dance-measure struck up again, her partner seized her hands and whirled her round and round after her departing comrades, until the last glimpse of her tiny feet twinkled off behind the "sets" at the left.

"What do you know of that gentleman in the box? You flirted with him outrageously, Miss Claire," said her partner, jealously, holding on to her hands which she tried to free.

"I know nothing of him. I never saw him before. I don't know what you mean by flirting; but I think you are unkind and I wish you would let me go. You hurt my hands."

She said it very gently and coldly, and he immediately released her, muttering:

"You are a queer girl, Claire. You never take an interest in any one."

"I have no time to take an interest in anything but my singing, Carlos."

"Well, good-night, Claire."

"Good-night," she responded, in her sweet, cold tones.

"A person might eat his heart out for her—she would not care," muttered Carlos, as she glided away.

It was the last of the chorus for that evening. The girls were hurriedly slipping out of their costumes and into their everyday dresses. Two or three of them had handsome clothes, with silk wraps, or seal-skins, almost equal to Alberta's own; the majority, however, were very plainly clad and appeared very commonplace indeed in their cheap frocks and hats, with their thin shawls wrapped about them. When they left the theater, the second tenor was waiting to see the young lady in the seal-skin

cloak safely home, a carriage was waiting for Alberta, the husbands had come to escort their wives; and the remainder of the chorus had to make its way home as best it could, without other protection than the consciousness of the police being on call if needed.

Little Claire had no friend to come for her. Carlos had offered more than once to see that she reached her home all right; but she had courteously declined his company, stating that her residence was not three blocks away, and the officer on that beat always looked out for her welfare. Drawing her shawl closely about her, for there was a keen night-wind, she hurried around the corner, down the block, and back on the next street, to a shabby boarding-house in the rear of the theater.

"It's a cold night, Flannigan," she said, cheerfully, to the policeman who paced by as she ran up the steps and opened the door with a night-key. "I hope you are comfortable."

"Snug as a bug in a rug, my little dear," he answered her. "Swate drames to your little ladyship."

Big Flannigan, the burly officer, made it his business to protect the night-journey of the little maid; she was as safe with him as his own little girl could have been; Claire had won his heart by her pretty manners, her quiet dignity, and her loneliness.

"To think of the poor bit-thing not havin' so much as a father, let alone a mother, to look after her! Sure, I'd put meself out to see she got home safe. Lots and lots is the times they comes sneaking afther her, an' she none the wiser, God bless her! She never sees 'em, or knows they're a bad lot. An' they know me, troth, they do that! Here's one of 'em, now, bad 'cess to him, a reg'lar swell, wid his pockets stuffed out wid goold, I make no doubt, a-creepin' after, an' a-lookin' up an' a-takin' the number of the house! I'd like to collar him an' march him off to the jug, would he l'ave me an excuse! Ouch, but this is a big-bug, an' a for-rin gentleman, at that, I take it! He's got the number—I can't help that—but he'll get no funder, that I can tell him."

Big Flannigan stood by the lamp-post looking on while the dark gentleman, quite indifferent to his cool stare, wrote down the number of the house in a note-book, restored it to an inside pocket, and walked on with the air of one quite accustomed to doing as he pleased.

The bells of the city struck twelve as little Claire climbed the two long, dirty, and ill-lighted flights of stairs leading to her small room at the top of the house. When she had groped her way in she lighted the gas, revealing an apartment pinched in dimensions and in furnishing, but not absolutely destitute of charm—something of the grace of its young occupant being discernible through its poverty. It being graciously in the nature of warm air to ascend, the place was not uncomfortable, though the little singer was not allowed a fire by the terms of her agreement with her landlady. To make room for almost the sole heirloom left her by her mother—an old-fashioned upright Erard piano, in a case of solid carved rosewood, grown more beautiful with age—Claire had sacrificed her bed, a lounge being made to do duty instead. She must have the piano to accompany her singing practice. She had bought with her own money the pretty chintz—gray ground sprinkled with pink rosebuds—which covered this lounge and curtained the window. The stained top of the cheap dressing-bureau was hidden by a piece of the same chintz. Everything was as neat as wax. There were several engravings on the walls, and a great quantity of choice music on the piano. There was an air of home about, which would have made even a stranger feel the charm of this little nest up under the eaves. The apartments of the lady boarder on the first floor, in all their tarnished glory of threadbare Brussels, and soil-stained crimson plush, were not to be compared with this poor room, so dainty and so tasteful—the landlady herself felt the charm which she could not explain. On this night its little mistress was welcomed by a breath of English violets and lilies-of-the-valley in a vase before the dressing-glass; Carlos had left them at the door for her that morning.

Claire hung her hat and shawl in a shallow closet and came to the bureau, beside which the gaslight burned, showing a red rose in either cheek which had not been there when she left the theater. Her eyes had grown larger and brighter—she was laboring under some great excitement.

"He followed me home," she murmured, to her image in the glass. "I saw him, as I was putting my latch-key in the door."

The dark eyes of the image in the mirror dilated with wonder that had in it a shade of awe and fear; they looked back at little Claire from under their long fringes with a gaze full of mystery as well as surprise—but, they could tell her nothing; so, after a time, she slowly undressed and slipped into her soft white ruffled nightgown, in which she looked more like a child than ever—knelt and said her prayers—rolled herself up in a down quilt like a moth in a cocoon, and nestled down on the couch to innocent sleep—"sleep, which knits up the raveled sleeve of care"—and which, gradually stealing over her eyelids, kissed away her wonder and her dread of those fiery eyes which had dwelt upon her from the stage-box that evening; sleep, which gave rest and holy dreams to the young chorus-singer

CHAPTER II.

BY FAIR MEANS OR FOUL.

"Each walks with a spy or a jailer behind him."

"PIERRE!"

In one of the sumptuous guest-chambers of a house on Fifth avenue a gentleman, at eight the next morning, was dressing for the day, assisted by his body-servant, a clever-looking mulatto. It was the foreign-looking person who had stared so intently at little Claire the previous evening; but he was not a foreigner, however, but a Louisianian of wealth and standing, who was paying a flying visit to New York, and had been persuaded to leave his hotel and take up his abode for a few days with Aubrey Chayce, a fashionable young millionaire, who kept up a bachelor establishment on the avenue.

"Pierre!"

"Yes, mastah."

"I saw the girl on the stage last night."

"Yes, mastah, I was in the gallery—I seen her, too."

"I must have an interview with her to-day or to-morrow. Pierre, you have been with me all your life; when I was a lad of ten you were a little pickaninny of two; you have never done anything but wait on me. You and I have been through some strange scenes together. You were with me through the war—you dressed me for my wedding—I expect you will dress me for my grave. You are the only living human being who knows a certain part of my history—the only friend I can rely on to see me safely through what I then undertook. You know the stumbling-block this girl may become to me. 'May become,' I say, since the probability is that she will give me no great trouble. If she should, I rely on you, Pierre, to do me a signal service."

"Mastah, you know there is nothing in the world I would not willingly do for you. All Pierre was made fo' was to wait on mastah."

"You have always proven both faithful and efficient. Now, the time has come when I may ask of you more than I ever have before. I believe you would do whatever I wish, for my sake and for Miss Elsie's sake," and the master looked steadily in the eyes of the man, who seized his hand and kissed it.

"I would stand up an' be shot fo' you an' missa."

"I believe it. I may want you to do something harder than that. Supposing, Pierre, it should become necessary to get rid of this girl?" he asked, in a low, unsteady voice.

"It could be done," was the firm answer, and a sudden gleam—it might almost be called a gleam of murderous cunning—showed an instant in the black eyes and vanished.

"Thanks, Pierre; I thought you would not fail me. 'Desperate ills require desperate remedies.' However, I hope we shall have no trouble with Claire. I would not go near her at all; but, you know the ladies at the convent in Baltimore who brought her up, to.d me she had the wildest ideas of her own future—that she was exceedingly proud of being a Laselle—think of it!" with a laugh—"and that she keeps her mother's marriage-certificate and her father's love-letters to her mother among her choicest treasures. Pierre, we must have those things!"

"I should say so, mastah."

"By fair means or foul."

"Jus' as mastah says. Pierre is Mastah Laselle's servant."

The gentleman walked up and down the room, perturbed, excited; the servant watched him with affectionate concern. Some one tapped at the door, announcing breakfast; the visitor would have gone down without coat or cravat—Pierre called him back and completed the elegant toilet.

When the guest, a few moments later, entered the dining-room and greeted his handsome young host no one could have dreamed that he had a care on his mind; he was all smiles and affability. There were only the two of them at table. They chatted away in the careless fashion of those who have nothing to do but enjoy themselves; the guest complimented the chocolate and his friend's cook, chattered about last night's opera—complained of the remoteness of plantation-life from the pleasures of the city.

"But we have amusements of our own, after all, Mr. Chayce. We ride, and drive, and give balls, and make up parties to go to town. You say you intend visiting Florida the latter part of February. I shall never forgive you if you fail to take Belle-rivière on your way. My wife will be most happy to welcome you; so will my daughter—though she is only a little witch of fourteen. Elsie is the light of our home, Mr. Chayce; she promises to be rarely beautiful, and is full of spirit and gayety. I need not tell you she is my idol. It distresses me to think the time is coming when we may have to give her up to some man. Yet," he added, with a little laugh, "if Elsie must marry, as I suppose she will be thinking of doing some day, and if my friend Chayce be not a Benedict by that time—nothing in the world would gratify me so much as for you two to take a fancy to each other."

"Thanks. You pay me a high compliment, Mr. Laselle. I hope to make your daughter's acquaintance before many weeks. I don't think I am a marrying man; still, I have time in which to change my mind while mademoiselle is growing up. After all, it will depend on the lady's inclination."

The two men smiled at each other across the table, at this vague plotting for the unknown future. They finished breakfast at their leisure, lighted cigars and went out for a morning stroll. As they came out into Union Square Chayce said:

"Will you come in this music-store a few moments, Mr. Laselle? I promised to look at a piano to-day. I'm going to get rid of my old one."

"That reminds me, Elsie asked me to bring her some music."

The two gentlemen entered the store; it was down two steps from the level of the pavement. As they passed in another gentleman passed out. He, too, was richly dressed and seemed to shiver in his fur-lined overcoat, as if he came from a hotter climate; his cheeks were sallow, his eyes dark and deep-set, restless and piercing. A lightning flash leaped out of them when they fell on the Southerner; but Laselle was speaking to his friend and did not notice the other person, who was sallower than ever when he set his foot on the pavement, for his face had blanched.

"Julien Laselle! the last person I expected to meet here! I thought that pleasure would have to be deferred until I went South. What is he doing in New York? I think he will bear watching. Ten to one he is going to meddle with the little girl! If Victor were alive—my friend Victor—would he not thank me to keep an eye on his child?"

Cold as it was, he crossed the street and sat down on a bench in the square where he could keep the music-store in sight. Presently a slim girl went quickly by, giving him a modest glance of curiosity, he was so evidently from some other land. He started up from his leaning attitude and gazed after her.

"By all the Fates, her living image! Is this place haunted?"

And now he quitted the bench and followed the girl.

It was little Claire on her way to rehearsal; he watched her until she had entered the theater.

"So," he remarked to himself, drawing a long breath, "she follows in her mother's footsteps."

He asked the surly doorkeeper for the address of the young lady who had just gone in.

"We ain't allowed to give it," was the gruff reply.

"Her name?"

"It's down on the bills as Claire Mason; they mostly go by some other name than their true one, sir."

"How long will it be before rehearsal is over?"

"That I can't tell you, sir; it's sometimes longer, sometimes shorter. The manager is very strict; he don't like gentlemen hanging about."

"I am pleased to hear that," said the stranger, smiling. "Yet he can hardly prevent my walking up and down on the pavement if I have a fancy to do so." He did not speak so much like a foreigner as he looked like one.

"That Claire does have the greatest lot of fools after her!" muttered the doorkeeper as the stranger passed on. "An' she never sees 'em—never gives 'em a look. My two-year-old baby at home ain't more innocent than she is. All she thinks of is her singing. There he comes, back here!—bound to wait till she comes out, I dare say," he added, five minutes later, as the gentleman came walking slowly back. "I do wish they would leave the little girl alone! This one has oceans of money, I should say—some furrin nabob!"

And here an extremely dandified colored person came along and stopping in front of the opera-house, took up a position in front of a lamp-post, against which he leaned with an air of apparent negligence.

"That nigger has an easy berth, I take it," muttered the old doorkeeper, surveying him with contempt. "Jeweled and fixed up to kill! I reckon he's vally to the nabob. That explains his loitering about here; he's waitin' fur his master;" but this shrewd guess of the old fellow was not quite correct, as we know.

Pierre was on the watch; but he would just as soon have expected to see a "spook" as this sallow-faced personage, wrapped in rich furs, who presently walked slowly by and gave him a long full look out of a pair of deep-set eyes that seemed to act like a shock from an electric battery on the colored man, whose jaw dropped and whose tawny skin turned a sort of lead color.

"My laws!" he ejaculated, to himself, when the stranger was out of hearing, "I neber saw such eyes—like live coals—for all de worl' like de debil himself! He 'minded me powerful of—but sho', I'm not one ob de superstitious sort, like common colored trash! Lots of folks dissembles each other; it's only natural. It's a coincident—only a coincident. Dat gentleman's from Cuba or Rio Janeiro, or some such place; I knows the cut of their jib."

Meantime, the gentleman was also murmuring to himself:

"Julien and his valet! Pierre was always a rascal. What is he watching the theater door for? Did I not say so? Poor, poor little butterfly!—will it not flutter into some one of these nets spread to snare it? Come, come! this is better than the play they will have to-night on the stage. 'All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.' Let me see the curtain come down on the first scene of this—farce?—tragedy?"

And behold, little Claire flutters out into the wintry sunshine, and the mulatto "shadows" her to her home, and the sallow-faced gentleman laughs in his sleeve.

CHAPTER III.

FACE TO FACE.

But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face,
God, in his mercy, give her grace."

—Tennyson.

"THAT same gentleman is in the box staring at you harder than ever. I would like to choke him!" said Carlos, sotto voce, during the peasant-dance that evening.

As they whirled to their place at the front Claire looked up—yes, there were those black eyes which had so disturbed her the night before. And there, sitting beside the dark gentleman, was another, his opposite in good looks—for Aubrey Chayce was a blonde of the most perfect type. Never, never had little Claire seen any one so beautiful. He had a face, one look at which had set fire to the light fancies of many a girl's heart. A beautiful head poised above a white throat and broad shoulders; gold-tinted hair that would crisply curl in spite of merciless croppings; dark-blue eyes with womanish lashes, a mouth red and softly-curved but with a resolute finish, a blonde mustache—one may catalogue his features, yet fail to give an impression of his easy, high-bred air, his careless smile, the wonderful steel-blue flash of a sudden glance.

For the first time Claire was conscious under observation. Her long lashes drooped, her heart bounded under its scarlet bodice; for both were looking directly at her—evidently talking of her.

Were those two elegant persons in the right-hand lower stage-box talking about the insignificant little chorus-singer? Let us listen and learn.

"Only what might have been expected," says the dark gentleman. "There is a vulgar proverb—'What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh.' I am sorry to find her here."

"She seems an innocent little thing—and very lovely."

"Seems! What can you tell by a woman's face? She is sly enough if she is like her mother. I have half a mind to quit New York without going near her. I have come too late."

"Whose fault is that, Laselle?"

"Hers, most decidedly. I wished the Sisters to keep her always in the convent; but the mother was too strong in her. She insisted that she was born to be a great singer, and left them despite of their opposition. I only learned that she had done so quite recently. You understand, she has no legal claim on me. Her mother, Mariella, was a singer, who flung her enchantments around my brother when he was scarcely more than a boy. He was very fond of her, and, so far as I know, she was true to him while he lived. After he was shot, in the Battle of the Wilderness, he asked me to make what provision I could for Mariella and her baby; but I could do little, in those days; no Southerner was rich at the end of the war; the singer died of consumption in a couple of years, and the child was placed with the good nuns in Baltimore. You see, she has no claims on me; nor does she seem to need me; yet, I have a small sum of money which came to Victor after his death, when the Yankees bought his worn-out land; and I must get it off my hands by giving it to her."

While the last scene was on, the Southerner wrote hastily on a leaf torn from his note-book:

"MADEMOISELLE CLAIRE MASON: If you care to receive a small amount of money left by a colonel in the Confederate service, who died during the war, call to-morrow at 11 A. M. at No. —, Fifth avenue."

"JULIEN LASELLE, of Louisiana."

This note was handed to the chorus-singer by a mulatto as she came out of the theater. In a daze of wonder as to what was in it, she hurried home to her little attic room, where she lighted her lamp and read it over and over.

Laselle! Why, that was her own name! Her father was a colonel and died during the war! That gentleman who had stared at her so had startled her because he might have been a more mature image of the faded ambrotype which she cherished as her father's likeness. Julien Laselle—he must be her own uncle! And he wanted to see her! Why was his note so cold and curt? It was not like the letter of a relative. Perhaps—yes, of course!—he was ashamed of her because she was only a poor little chorus-singer. He was an aristocrat—one could see that at a glance!

"So am I," said Little Claire, with flushed cheeks and kindling eyes, "as proud to the full as he is! Was not my father his brother? Am I not a soldier's daughter? Perhaps I am misjudging him: to-morrow will show. It would be so pleasant to find friends whose veins beat with the same blood as my own!"

Cherishing this happy thought, Claire said her prayers, and managed, after a time, to fall asleep, despite the excitement which thrilled every nerve.

Aubrey Chayce and his elegant guest were through with their breakfast and morning cigar when eleven o'clock struck, and were busy in the library with the newspapers.

Simultaneously with the soft chime of the bronze timepiece, came a ring at the bell; the next minute the footman presented a salver to the guest, on which lay a modest card, inscribed "Claire Laselle."

A flush came over the haughty face of the Southerner:

"By all that's impertinent, Chayce, the girl dubs herself a Laselle! Doubtless she will prove as bold in other things as in that. Well, I will give her a check for \$1,000, and shake her off as quickly as possible."

"And I will retire until the agreeable interview is over."

"Not at all; please keep your seat. I shall get rid of her the sooner for having some one present."

"Very well, then. Andrew, show the young lady in."

Yesterday, when little Claire stole that look at the blonde young gentleman in the box, the wildest stretch of imagination could hardly have foreshadowed a visit to his house. She recognized him, immediately, as she entered the library, with that graceful, self-possessed air natural to her—lounging in a velvet easy-chair, his beautiful head thrown back against the maroon cushions, his perfect profile looking as clear-cut as a cameo. How handsome he was! How perfectly the luxury of this house became him! A thrill of new, sweet, strange emotion swept every nerve of the young singer; she was glad that he did not look round at her; she could hardly have borne his observation calmly.

However, she was not here to see him; her glance sought the face of the dark gentleman, so like that picture she had kissed a thousand times.

Julien Laselle had arisen from his chair; he did not come forward to meet her; he did not extend a cordial hand;—he bowed coldly and formally, as to one he met on business terms, merely; so that Claire faltered, and the words she had been about to speak died on her lips; she could not call this man "uncle."

"Be seated, Miss Claire," he said, with chilling politeness. "Let me first be certain I am not mistaken in the person. Your mother was Mariella, the singer, was she not?"

"Yes, until she became Madame Laselle, your brother's wife. She never sung after she was married. She has told me so. I would not give up my singing to be a king's bride."

"That is a pity. I had some idea of offering to place you in school, and to provide handsomely for your future, on condition that you would promise never to return to the stage."

"Oh, I could not promise that! I shall be a great singer, some day, uncle; and you will then not look down on me, as you do now. I am very proud of my name—of my birth. It makes me thrill from head to foot with joy when I think that my father was—a noble officer, who died fighting! That memory is my inheritance. I am poor and desolate, uncle; but, I never forget that my father was Colonel Victor Laselle."

The little hands had twined themselves together, a pink rose had come out in the pale cheeks, the great, velvety dark eyes glowed under the brim of the homemade hat; the sweet voice, ringing with repressed enthusiasm, stirred some responsive feeling in the breast of the young master of the house, who had lowered his paper, and was looking at the little chorus-singer over the top of it.

Her words had an embarrassing effect on the aristocrat, who stood looking down on her; a dark blush came up slowly in his face and burned there for some time. His throat seemed to "have a frog in it," as he said, stiffly:

"Well, well! I suppose you know that your father had lost every dollar of his property when he went into the war. His slaves were liberated, his plantations laid waste—there was nothing to leave to those dependent on him; but he bade me, should anything ever come out of his impoverished estate, to give it to you. Last winter a Yankee paid me five thousand dollars for the old plantation; there were debts to be paid; here is a check for the one thousand dollars remaining after those were paid."

Claire looked at the bit of paper he held out to her.

"Dear, dear father!" she murmured. "He thought of me—his little child!"

"Are you not going to take it?"—the check was trembling in his hand.

"Oh, yes; and thank you, uncle, for the trouble you have had about it."

As she took the slip of paper she pressed it passionately, reverently to her lips, as if it were something direct from the touch of the never-known father whom her loving heart had idealized.

"Take care of it," said the Southerner, abruptly turning away. He walked to a window, stood there a moment, and came back. "I will say to you again, Claire, that, if you will leave the stage and give up the idea of being a public singer, I will place you in the best school you may select here at the North for three years; you shall have clothes and spending-money equal to the other pupils; and I will make some provision for you when you come out. I, too, lost all my property during the war; but since then I have had left to me, by a relative in Cuba, large estates. I am amply able to do this for you—anxious to do it. If you accept my offer, however, you must agree to another article in the terms—you must drop the name of Laselle. Your mother's is the only name which rightly belongs to you, and—I have objections to your assumption of mine."

"Give up my father's name?" indignantly.

"I tell you," growing impatient, "you have no right to it—no legal right. You are old enough now to understand the true state of affairs, mademoiselle; and you must know that your mother was not my brother's wife. Heaven forbid! A Laselle never quite so far forgot himself as to marry an actress! However, Victor had a kind heart, and in dying, he asked me to do for you what I could."

Little Claire listened to these cruel words in mute amazement; as their meaning grew upon her, her eyes flashed with a fire before which those of the haughty Southerner quailed; she

drew up her slim, girlish figure; her words dropped, burning as flakes of fire:

"Slanderer! You call yourself a gentleman, yet stand there and utter a base falsehood! I have the marriage certificate of my parents; I have read it a hundred times. No false certificate, either, for the clergyman who married my mother, buried her, and is at this day living, and a friend of mine. I am a Laselle, and, I hope, a better one than you are! For, it is not only my dead mother whom you slander, but my dead father—your own brother!—who is in the grave and cannot defend his own honor. Oh, that is basest treachery! Farewell forever, uncle! It is I who disown you! I would not receive your charity were I perishing of hunger. A man who slanders the dead and would rob a girl of her only birthright—her good name! Think not I shall give up my dear father's name; you will hear it more times than you care to, perhaps, if I achieve what I aspire to!" and little Claire, who had hurled these sentences at him with indescribable scorn, turned quickly and walked out of the room.

There was a minute's silence, during which the outer door was heard to close, and then Julien Laselle burst into a rather constrained laugh.

"Little spitfire! By Jove, Chayce, the girl has some of the Laselle spirit, if she *did* come by it in a left-handed fashion. She fairly put me to the blush. I am sorry I hurt her feelings; I had no idea she laid claim to her father, in that style. I had to speak as I did, or she would have presumed on rights which she did not possess," and he mopped his face with his handkerchief, for a cold sweat had broken out on it when the girl had referred so earnestly to her intentions.

Aubrey Chayce glanced up from his paper with one of those careless, swift flashes of his blue eyes which seemed so careless and unob-servant.

"She is a plucky little thing," he remarked; "and she has a lovely face," and then he returned to his news-column, leaving his guest feeling very hot and uncomfortable. Not for the world would the planter have this young millionaire, whom he had chosen as his daughter's future husband, suspect that he was guilty of high-handed fraud in his transaction with the young opera-singer.

His uneasiness continued, so that he soon excused himself and went to his room, where his servant was packing his baggage, for his visit to New York was drawing to a close.

"Pierre, if that beggar had been a queen she could not have held herself higher. We must get hold of those papers, or she will make us trouble."

"Yes, mastah, I have thought of a plan."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASTER OF BELLE-RIVIERE.

"My thinking of her, or the music's strain,
Or something that never will be expressed,
Has brought her back from the grave again
With the jasmine on her breast."

TWENTY years ago a proud old planter of Louisiana had come up to Washington to spend the winter and to introduce his son of twenty-two to the gayeties of the Capital. It was a time of burning excitement in political circles; but Victor Laselle, the son, took small interest in that which absorbed his father; he did, however, improve his opportunities for pleasure so thoroughly that before the Inauguration he was secretly married to a young and beautiful opera-singer, against whose reputation scandal had never breathed a word—a lady quite fit to be his wife—a lady he was wildly enamored of—yet whom he dared not venture to introduce into his father's house as his bride. He plead with her for a few months or years of secrecy—to which she foolishly consented; the war broke out; he sent her to New York and joined the Confederate ranks; they did not meet after that; his father died, a ruined man, of a broken heart; Victor was promoted to be a colonel, for distinguished bravery; news came to him, by letter, that he was the father of a little girl; time rolled on; his younger brother, Julien, fought by his side; the long, long, awful battle of the Wilderness was fought—after that a blank for Mariella Laselle—a darkness full of doubt and fear—a despairing certainty—Colonel Victor Laselle's name among the lists of Confederate dead!

Seventeen years have passed since the lovely Mariella read that black list; she, too, is dead; Julien Laselle, with a letter in his hand, walks up and down the long "gallery" that runs around the second story of his house at Belle-

Rivière. His colored valet, Pierre, had just brought that letter, with others, and a bundle of newspapers from the river-town, four miles below.

"So, Aubrey Chayce will be here, perhaps to-day. I must send down to the boat this afternoon. I hope he will not find it dull here; I must do something fine in the way of entertainment. What shall it be? The country is apt to be dull to a city man."

Dull! He must be gifted with small love of the beautiful who could find it dull at Belle-Rivière, in this last week of February! Belle-Rivière, the loveliest spot in all Louisiana, lying high and dry, sixty feet above the level of the low, wet lands about it—hedged about with roses, embowered in lemon and orange groves—the large, rambling two-story white house matted in jasmine and honeysuckle, every pillar of the long piazzas, every chimney and casement and gable cumbered with a weight of bloom and greenery—the river rolling its spring-tide not far away—the air crystal, the sky sapphire. The master did it injustice when he imagined it could be dull to a Northern man, with the chill of snowflaws still clinging about him.

"I must call all our resources into play," continued Laselle, pacing up and down the sweet jasmine-shaded gallery. "I want him to have a good time. Some day, I hope, he will be my Elfie's husband. I shall work to bring it about. I like him; I am fascinated by him; I don't see how any woman can withstand him. I wonder if I have done an imprudent thing in inviting him to Belle-Rivière? Somebody's careless words may reveal to him the secret I would hide from him, of all men. Yet he is unsuspicious, thoughtless—not the man to put this and that together—to piece out a story out of scraps—he will be here only a week—the danger is too trifling to give me even this half-hour's uneasiness. I must inform Mrs. Laselle of the expected arrival, speak for a grand dinner, send notice to some of my neighbors that I am to have company. Let me see, it is noon; I will have some luncheon, and drive to the town so as to be there before three—the boat may be along by three. Ah, Elfie, is that you? What have you been doing all the morning?"

"Nothing, papa; at least, only swinging, out under the cypresses."

"Swinging?"

"Yes; and dreaming. I dreamed that the Belle-Rivière was a garden near Bagdad in the goodly time of Haroun Al Raschid, and that I was a Persian girl, 'serene, with argent-lidded eyes,' and that—I had—a lover—whose boat

"Rustling through
The low and bloomed foliage, drove
The fragrant, glistening deeps, and clove
The citron-shadows in the blue."

"A lover! My little girl dream of a lover!" laughed Julien Laselle. "I think her papa will have to be her only lover for some years yet!"

"I don't know about that, papa, *cher*. I shall be fifteen in four days; and I am very tall of my age, every one says. Juliet was only fourteen when she married Romeo."

"Elfie! Elfie!" exclaimed the father, in astonishment.

"Oh, you need not be jealous, papa! I have not found my Romeo yet. I mean to be very, very particular! I have never, so far, seen any one one-hundredth part as nice, or as handsome as you, papa. I hardly think I ever shall," with a sigh. "Still, I may! At present, I have to be satisfied with you and mamma and my kitten. Isn't she the loveliest little love you ever saw? I have had her with me all the time I was in the swing. I have put that necklace of cape-jasmines around her, because cats are fond of perfumes. The little cuddling darling!"

"Seriously, Elfie, which do you like best, kitty or me?"

The girl burst into a sweet, coquettish laugh. "It is hard to tell. You are very handsome, papa, and I admire you ever so much; but kitty is just as white as snow and as soft as down—"

"And her society is more suited to you, intellectually!"

"Now, papa, when you are jealous you are always sarcastic. I don't care a feather for my intellect; my beauty is to be my chief talent. I expect to succeed on the strength of my resemblance to you."

"You can claw and kiss at the same moment, can't you, Elfie?"

"Indeed, I can. I know I am awfully spiteful. Nurse says I used to spit and scratch like a wild cat. I gave up using my finger-nails some years ago; but my temper bristles with invisible claws still; be careful you don't ruffle it, papa darling. Who is your letter from?"

"This one is from Mr. Aubrey Chayce, of New York."

"And is he coming, as you expected?"

"Yes, Elfie. Make yourself pretty and you shall drive with me to the steamboat-landing by-and-by. He may arrive this afternoon."

"Oh, joy! And may I do the driving?"

"I'm going to take the black span; you could hardly manage it."

"Ah, cannot I? I drove the black team every day you were away."

"Elfie! you will be killed some day."

"I expect to die when my time comes."

"Is there anything you are afraid of?"

"I am just a little afraid of you, papa—when you are in a passion."

"I am glad to hear that. I shall contrive to get in a passion when I desire to make you mind."

"Don't do it just now, please," laughed the girl, slipping her hand into his arm and walking by his side up and down the long, cool gallery—a tall, slim, graceful young creature, the more youthful and softer image of the father with whom she kept step.

She had his clear, dark complexion, his delicate, haughty features, his purple-black hair and bright flashing eyes. The dusky bloom on the tresses which fell below her waist was like the tint of purple on the sloe; her little mouth was scarlet and sweet as a ripe strawberry; the flush of pomegranate blossoms, or oleander, was like the soft red in her cheeks; her face was a pure, delicate oval; her eyes changed with every thought and impulse—were sweet, or dreamy, or merry, or darting fire, as the passing mood might be, but always glorious wells of beauty under the shadow of their dark lashes. She was dressed in a simple white cambric, with a sash of cardinal ribbon about the slim waist—a school-girl, nothing more; yet older in her fancies, than any one would dream from her childish, frolicsome, petulant ways;—her father's pet and idol, now ruling him, and now yielding to him—a passionate, willful, loving, tempestuous creature, ready to worship or to hate, to caress or to tear in pieces—bewitching, even in her rebellious moods—and promising to ripen swiftly into all-conquering beauty.

Julien Laselle laid his dark, slender hand lovingly on his daughter's.

"I am thinking, what can I do to make it pleasant for Mr. Chayce. I should like to give him proof of our Southern hospitality. Do you think we can get up a ball at Belle-Rivière, Elfie? The weather is lovely and the moon will be at the full."

"A ball? Oh, papa, what rapture in the very idea!"

"You would like it then?"

"Papa, does my kitten like cream?—does the sky like stars, or gentlemen politics, or summer roses?"

He smiled into the bright face turned eagerly up to his own.

"Go consult your mother, then, Elfie. If we are to have it, I must speak to some of my friends in town this afternoon. Arrange it to suit yourselves—a *bal masque*, or a plain ball and supper; or tableaux first, and a dance afterward."

Away darted Elfie, swift and bright as the humming-bird which just then made a dash away from the clustered bells of the honeysuckle into which it had been dipping its bill.

Julien Laselle, leaning over the railing of the gallery, his dark face framed between masses of drooping jasmine, looked off toward the far-winding, sluggish river shining like dull dead gold under the noonday sun.

"If he should suspect—if he should suspect—it would spoil everything! What, if I have made a fool of myself, in inviting him to my home? It is always a dangerous game to play. Bah! those cape-jasmines! How sweet—how deadly sweet they are! She always wore them. Strangely enough, Elfie is passionately fond of them and will have them everywhere! I would to God I could shake off the pale ghost of her who used to twine their silver stars in her hair or shelter them in her fairer bosom! Ah, Julien Laselle,

"Has the past, then, so much power,
You dare not face a little flower
Lest it make you hang yourself
For being yourself for an hour?"

With a gesture of self-contempt he turned and went into the upper hall, which, in the airy Southern fashion, ran straight through the house, with a door at either end opening on flower-twined galleries.

He stopped for five minutes in his wife's

chamber, where Elfie, at her mother's feet, was pouring out her story of the ball.

Mrs. Laselle, a tall, thin woman with hardly a trace of beauty, was leaning back in her invalid's chair, listening with languid patience. Being nearly always ill, she looked ten years older than her handsome husband, though their ages were the same. In her young days, an elegant figure and fine dressing had given her a certain style which passed for good looks; she had brought a good old name and some wealth into the family; and she lived on the prestige of this, now that her charms, such as they were, had faded. Julien had never loved her; but he treated her with a certain formal respect which satisfied her; and all the hungry passion of his torrid nature was lavished in his love for their only child, Elfie, light of his eyes, darling of his home, object of his ambition.

"Well, madame, my wife, what do you say to the ball?"

"You and Elfie forget the condition of my nerves," complainingly.

"Oh, no! but we promise you, Olivia, no care or trouble shall come upon you in consequence of our festivities. If you do not wish to appear, we will not require it; though," he added, with a touch of artful flattery, "it would be a pleasure to see madame in an evening dress and jewels again. Do you think you will be able to come down to dinner this afternoon at five?"

"I shall make an effort, Julien. I am curious to see what there is so fascinating about this Mr. Aubrey Chayce."

"So am I," added Elfie, demurely. "I have wondered until I am tired of idle speculation. Of course, I shall be horribly disappointed!—one always is when one expects so much. Here is Phyllis with your luncheon, *petite maman*; and so, good-by; papa and I are going to drive to town after we have had our cold chicken and claret. You must look out on the drive about three, *maman*, to behold your pride and darling handling the ribbons over the black team while papa and the beautiful Unknown sit shrinking on the back seat, pale with fright."

The mother smiled faintly; the daughter threw back a kiss from the threshold as she disappeared; the father, after courteously asking if madame had any orders, bowed decorously and followed the witching hoyden down-stairs.

At a little after three, as she had foretold, Elfie appeared at a distance on the white shell carriage-drive, proudly holding in check the champing, restless, quivering horses, impatient to be on the full run, yet obedient to the will of the slim young girl on the driver's box, who sat there—the ebony coachman beaming at her exploits, rigid beside her—her hat blown back off her head, her eyes shining with excitement, her white frock fluttering about her little feet, her slim, supple hands guiding the reins—her heart throbbing with pleasure and triumph and some other strange, unnamable, unrecognized feeling which had pierced through it when her merry eyes first met the blue splendor of their visitor's.

She had allowed the horses to fly like the wind along the four miles of country road between the town and the plantation; but, when they entered the charmed precincts of Belle-Rivière, the murmur of delight which came from the lips of Aubrey Chayce—his petition to be given time to admire—was heeded; she reined in her spirited team so that he could catch a flying glimpse of the long rose-hedges, the green fields, the rows of magnolias and oleanders beside the drives, the plots of flowers, the fountains, the gleam of the river, the shell-paths winding about beds of bloom, and leading to arbors covered with trellis-roses—to the deep twilight of mournful, mossy cypresses—to picturesque out-houses huddled in the rear of the main dwelling—and the hot sun blazing down on all, the air delicious with every imaginable blended sweet of orchards of apricot, orange and lemon, and gardens of heliotrope and lilies. To Aubrey, who had left New York, five days before in a whirling, blustering gust of snow and sleet, the effect was magical.

"I don't wonder you think there is no place like Belle-Rivière," he said to his host. "This is Paradise!"

"And the Peri," added Elfie, throwing him an arch glance over her shoulder, as she pulled up the restless team before the door.

"Yes, and the Peri," assented Aubrey, with his careless smile; "yet, not 'disconsolate,' if we are to judge by her bright face."

"By the way," he said, in a lower voice to his host, as they, having descended, watched Miss Elfie drive on in the direction of the stables, "I had company from New York on the boat; they came on board at St. Louis."

"Who, may I ask?"

"Bright's opera troupe. It has been resolved into a traveling company for the spring season."

"Is she still with the troupe?"

"Yes. I spoke with her once on the steamer. They were to disembark at Baton Rouge, too, I believe. Did you notice them?"

"No. You came off, immediately, and we drove away. I dare say they will stop; all the companies do." A shadow had fallen on the nost's face; he paused a little, then added: "Did you inform Claire that you were on your way to visit me?"

"I would hardly do that, Mr. Laselle."

"I beg your pardon, Aubrey; of course you would infer that I might not desire it. I wonder if she knows my place of residence?"

He mused a moment, then put away the intruding subject with one of his brilliant, winning smiles. "Welcome to Belle-Rivière, Mr. Chayce. I cannot say how honored and delighted I am to have you for my guest. Madame Laselle is an invalid; but she hopes for the pleasure of meeting you at dinner. And now, my house is yours."

Aubrey Chayce smiled a response, feeling no warning that this visit would differ from other agreeable visits he had made.

CHAPTER V.

TOO WARY FOR THE UNWARY.

A deed accurst! Strokes have been struck before
By the assassin's hand. —TAYLOR.

WHEN Claire left the presence of her uncle from that interview in the house of Aubrey Chayce, her first impulse had been to tear in pieces the check for \$1,000 which she held in her hand, and scatter it to the winds of heaven; her breast labored with the passion of indignation, which half-stifled her.

"Cruel—cruel! heartless—wicked! I do not care for *myself*, but to slander *them*—that is intolerable! My own father—my brave, honorable father, who died a soldier's death—whom my mother died for, pining herself out of the world, after him—to be maligned by a brother! Never do I want to see your face again, uncle. Better to live on alone, as I have lived. God, who cares for the sparrows, will care for me."

"About this money, had it come from him, I would not touch it. But, it was my father's—not his. I will use it for that purpose which is most sacred to me—my musical education. I will place it in bank until next June, when my engagement with Mr. Bright will be at an end; then, I will sail for Milan! I shall get at least one year of study under some able master. The dream, the longing of my life will come to pass. Ah, Claire, put away your angry thoughts and thank the good Father for what this money will do for you! And now, business—business! I am late, and shall have a fine to pay,"—for there was rehearsal again from twelve to two, and our little chorus-singer was behind time.

Her mind was crowded with agitated thoughts; but she threw her usual energy into her work, going through her part with more than fidelity—with enthusiasm; so as to win a word of praise from the manager.

Once free, she hurried away from the theater with a preoccupied air. So absorbed was she that she even passed Big Flannigan—who was standing on the corner in the idle consciousness of being off his beat—without observing him, until he called after her:

"Hallo, my little dear! You're not getting too proud to notice yer friends?"

"No, no," falling back to where he stood. "Walk on with me, Flannigan, and I will tell you something you will be glad to hear."

He went on with her, looking down at her with great curiosity.

"I have a thousand dollars—can you believe it?—and I'm going to keep it safe in bank until June; and then—I'm going abroad!"

He did not appear as delighted as she expected; his gray eyes looked down at her sharply, and he asked, rather gruffly:

"Where did you get *that*? Blast me, if I don't believe 'twas the dark gentleman as followed you night before last as give it to you!"

"Why, how did you guess it, Flannigan? It was he who gave it to me."

"An' you tuck it?" in tones of deep reproach.

"Why, yes—do you think I ought not? I was half-minded to tear the check in a hundred pieces; but I thought better of it."

"I w'u'dn't 'a' believed it of you, Miss Claire, I w'u'dn't, indade! It's bad—bad, takin' money ye hav'n't honestly earned."

"When it was my own father's?"

"Oh! yer own father's?"

"Yes. The gentleman you noticed is my

uncle. He brought the check up from the South with him; he had sold my father's old plantation—but there were debts, so that I only had this \$1,000 left. It is a great deal to me, though, Flannigan; it will make me a *prima donna*, perhaps! And when I am one, and make as much as this check every night I sing, why, you dear good old Flannigan you, I shall not forget how often you have taken care of me! You won't have to be out on cold winter nights when those good times come!"

"Bless your little heart, miss, I belave you! You're certain sure the gentleman is your uncle?" doubtfully. "Sure, if I thought he was decaving you with a rignmarole of a story, I'd wring his neck!"

"He is my uncle, sure enough. I knew him, when I saw him in the box, he is so much like my dear father; but I don't like him and I shall never call him uncle, or have anything more to do with him. He slandered my parents to me, and that is enough. Well, here I am home, and thanks for your company."

She ran up the steps, while the policeman sauntered on, muttering:

"I declare, she gave me a fright; but the dear little innocent didn't see what I suspicioned, which I'm glad she didn't; it would 'a' broke her heart; but I'm bound to look after her so long as there ain't nobody to do it better."

Meantime Claire, never thinking of the cold meat and bread awaiting her in the dining-room, hastened to her room, threw off her wraps, locked her door, and took out a box from the depths of the cheap trunk which stood in her closet. Seating herself on the floor she drew the box to her, reverently lifted the lid, and with a tender, affectionate touch explored its contents. Not that she did not know by heart every word of those few yellow, worn letters, which her father had written to her mother after their tragic parting—every little ornament and memento of that mother, which necessity had not forced her to part with—every lineament of their pictures far better than her own features—but that it was a comfort to her to see and touch them after the cruel wound she had received that morning. There was her mother's prayer-book; and, between its pages, the precious marriage-certificate. There were the letters beginning—"My own dear wife," "My darling wife." There was a little note on faded pink paper—about which some sweet, tropical perfume still clung—in which "Victor" passionately pleaded for "Mariella" to consent to a secret marriage, on the ground of his father's displeasure at the match. There was the plain heavy gold wedding-ring, with the date engraved inside.

"Wicked, wicked, cruel uncle!" cried Claire, her anger and grief growing as she gazed on the beautiful faces of her parents. "You crushed my sweet mother and you would crush me, to flatter that hateful family pride. Oh, I must not disgrace the name of Laselle by using it! I must give up the only treasure my brave father left me—his name! No, Mr. Julien Laselle, the daughter of Colonel Victor Laselle does not yield her inheritance at *your* bidding."

Among trinkets of lesser value there still remained a costly diamond cross, the wedding present of Victor Laselle to his bride. The jewels which had once glittered in Mariella's gold hair, on her exquisite neck, her snowy arms—jewels won by her beautiful voice—all went to support her and her child, after Victor joined the Confederate Army and his father went to wreck and ruin, and her own health broke down under the burden of motherhood, care, suspense and sorrow:—all, save this cross, which she directed, in her poor little will, should be kept until Claire grew up, if it were possible. She died—two years after the news of her husband's death, when baby Claire was not quite two—in the care of the good nuns in a convent in Baltimore. They knew her history and promised to bring up her child in peace and safety, within the convent walls. This promise they kept; Claire grew up amid the gentle nuns, gentle and loving as they, patient, religious; accomplished in such things as they judged fit for a young lady—drawing, embroidery, French, music, grammar and geography. With them she still might have been; but, some thrill of ambition drawn in with her mother's milk, or some drop of fire from her father's veins, urged her out into the busy world, to try her fate as her mother had done before her; and so, sadly displeasing the good Sisters, yet not without their prayers, she had gone forth to try her wings beyond the convent walls. When she went she took with her the little box of mementoes bequeathed to her—a talisman to keep the proud, pure, lonely girl from even the thought of evil.

Was it strange that—without meaning it—she looked down on poor Carlos, who worshiped the floor her little foot had touched?

Claire meant to become famous and rich; then, when honor and glory were hers, she meant to take her place as the daughter of the young officer who had fallen fighting for what he believed was right. This was the career she had marked out—this the inspiration that never failed her, even when she walked to her boarding-house at midnight, alone through the storms of winter.

To others—to Carlos—she was the lovely little chorus-singer, very sweet but much too reserved:—to herself she was the daughter of that dead hero, Colonel Laselle.

"I have never dared wear my diamond cross," murmured Claire, lingering fondly over her treasures. "Some day, I shall wear it with all the pride of one who dons an inherited jewel."

On the gold at the back of the cross was inscribed, "*Victor to Mariella, on our wedding-day.*" She looked long at this inscription; the brief winter afternoon drew near its close; even up in her "sky-parlor" twilight was growing, though the gold of a clear sunset shone against her window. From the reverie into which she had fallen Claire was aroused by a tap at the door. Hastily throwing the cross and the bundle of letters into the box, she arose and opened it; the boy who attended the front door stood there, with a note in his hand,

"Wants answer," he announced, in his graphic way.

Claire recognized the writing as that of her uncle, and held the note, somewhat as if it were a viper which might sting, while she went to the window to read it. It said, briefly:

"Please see my servant, Pierre. There is a matter I forgot to discuss this morning; he is prepared to explain it."

"See him?" asked Buttons, sententiously.

"Yes—I suppose so," answered Claire, hardly knowing what to say.

Instantly the boy vanished; in a couple of minutes there was another tap at the door, and there stood, elaborately bowing, a dandified colored-man with the easy air of a personal attendant.

"Are you Pierre?"

"Yes, ma'm'selle, I's Pierre. My mastah wished me to say to Ma'm'selle Claire, had she a diamond cross belonging to de Laselle family? His brudda Victor gave a cross to ma'm'selle's mudder; but it was not Mastah Victor's to give; so Mastah Julien he say, 'Please resto' it to the rightful owner. Fam'ly jewel—b'long to Mastah Julien Laselle.'"

A rosy flame rushed over Claire's proud face; she spoke hotly, with quivering lips and flashing eyes, while the colored man came a little inside the door, closed it behind him and stood watching her, grave, silent, but alert:

"It is not Julien Laselle's cross! It is *mine*! My father gave it to my mother; she bequeathed it to me. Give it up? Tell your master I will give it up when he proves, in open court, his right to it. Ask him if there is anything else he would like to *steal* from a poor girl?"

"It was the gran'modder's, the modder's, an' now it is mastah's," repeated the valet, rolling his eyes about as if in search of the article for which he asked. "Mastah Victor, he had suf-fin' writ on de back, which orter not be put dere. You betta give it up, ma'm'selle, to save you'se'f trouble."

"Never!" said Claire, haughtily.

"May I see it? I bin in de family long time, ebber sence de young mastah's bohn. I usen to see de mistass w'ar a di'mond cross." As he said this, he advanced slowly toward the girl, as if not thinking what he was doing, while his right hand was behind him, drawing a large white handkerchief from his pocket.

"No; I will not show it to you. Do not talk to me any more. Go back to your master and tell him that I de—"

Little Claire never finished the sentence. When she came to her senses it was perfectly dark in her little room, and she was sick and giddy. She could see the stars shining through her windows and so knew that it must be night. While she sat there in a heap on the carpet, wondering what had happened and what was the matter with her, a bell not far away struck seven.

Claire thought of the theater and struggled to her feet.

"I must be getting ready. Have I had my dinner? Ah, how faint and ill I feel! What is the matter?"

Suddenly memory rushed back into her va-

cant or dormant brain. With a stifled shriek she flew to light the gas.

Yes! the box was gone!

A large handkerchief lay on the floor. She picked it up; it gave out a sickening, faint odor of chloroform. The dastardly plan of Julien Laselle to rob the orphan of all proofs of her legitimate claims as the daughter of Victor had succeeded!

The confidential servant had done his work well—what was the risk in overpowering a frail girl and rendering her senseless by enveloping her face in a handkerchief saturated with the powerful anæsthetic? It was child's-play for him to do this and to secure the telltale box; then, to pass out with his spoil concealed under his overcoat. The plot was a simple one; the girl was not permanently injured; and it placed in the hands of the haughty Laselle those proofs which it was so important for him to suppress.

Claire sunk into a chair wringing her hands and repeating:

"Gone—gone!"

Then she sprung up with a wild impulse to get Big Flannigan and have Julien Laselle arrested for robbery, in the very house of his friend, Aubrey Chayce; but she sat down again, laughing scornfully at the idea that her accusation would have weight against a Southern gentleman in the home of an aristocrat like Chayce.

"I shall be called an adventuress—an impostor—my claims will be ridiculed—I shall be injured in my profession. No, no; I dare not seek justice; I am too friendless, too poor! He has succeeded by a dastardly exploit, worthy of a common burglar. A Laselle guilty of such a theft! Shame, shame! I will keep silence now; but it will be to bide my time. The letters, too—those sacred letters of my father to my mother! I hope his very soul will blush when he looks at them! And all to rob a poor little girl who only wants her father's name!"

Verily, Julien Laselle had been guilty of a pitiless outrage; but he had better claims to what he had taken than seemed possible to Claire, in her judgment of what he had done—more reasons than she could guess at or understand.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FINGER OF FATE—A MEETING.

The maiden dreamt

That some one put this diamond in her hand,
And that it was too slippery to be held,
And slipt or fell.

—TENNYSON.

"YES, Mr. Chayce, I shall be fifteen day after to-morrow! I only wish it were sixteen! I'm dying to be a young lady, wear long trains, and have gentlemen dangling after me, begging the privilege of holding my fan and bouquet—beseeching me for the honor of my hand in the dance! Oh, that will be heavenly, won't it, kitty? And, kitty, you shall not be forgotten in those happy times, either; you shall come in the parlor all you like, even when my beaux are there; and you shall have a gold necklace the day I'm sixteen."

Elfie caressed the soft white coat of her pet with a small brown hand, looking up at Aubrey Chayce with a laugh in her lovely eyes, while he indolently swung the hammock in which her ladyship was lounging—a hammock hung under blooming trees in a "garden of spice." The odorous pink blossoms above them scattered their petals over his gold head and broad shoulders—flickering shadows and sunny lights fell over the girl's black hair and white dress.

There was witchery in this southern splendor of early spring—witchery in the graceful, childish coquetry of Elfie with him and her darling kitten; he was enjoying himself highly, in a thoughtless fashion that had in it no deep feeling.

How could he guess that this little girl was falling desperately in love with him?—with a wild, romantic fervor as tropical as the bloom of the crimson roses and the pale passion-flowers about them? To him she was only a fascinating child, who had escaped the usual awkwardness of her age—a child whose hot temper, loving heart, and vivid imagination made her unusually interesting, and whose promise of beauty was glorious. He saw that she was her father's idol; but not once to his careless memory came back the once-expressed wish of Julien Laselle, that if his darling ever married, he hoped she would mate with him.

"I dare say you expect a surfeit of lovers when you come to that happy period of young ladyhood, Miss Elfie."

"Of course I shall have them," she answered, cuddling kitty in her neck. "They tell me I'm going to be very pretty; and then, our family

stands so high, Mr. Chayce; and papa is awfully rich since our uncle in Cuba died and left him a fortune. I only hope I shall not fall a prey to some heartless adventurer who marries me for my money," she added, musingly. "That would be too bad, wouldn't it, Mr. Chayce?"

"I could murder the wretch, just to think of it!" he responded, laughing, and immensely amused.

"So could I! I hope I never shall murder anybody, though. I have a fearful temper, I will tell you, confidentially. You would not think it, would you, to see me only when I am amiable. I will tell you what I'll do: I'll marry a gentleman already so very, very rich that he cannot possibly care for money."

"A splendid idea, Miss Elfie! You might marry me, for instance! I'm about as independent as any one I know of."

Never were jesting words uttered with greater carelessness. It took him curiously by surprise to see a rose-red color creep over Elfie's face and her dark eyelashes fall, while she bent her head lower over kitty, and murmured:

"Say that to me when I am sixteen, and I will see. I am quite sure I should trust what you said to me, and—so would papa."

"You're a little witch," he laughed, not knowing what else to say.

Then Elfie sat up in the hammock and looked him straight in the face with those bright eyes.

"Do you know what makes me like you?"

"Well, no—unless it is because I am a universal favorite."

"I declare, you have more vanity than I have—which is saying a good deal. I'll tell you why, then—because you were so good as to come here just in time to induce papa to give a ball on my birthnight. Of course, it isn't my ball, and I shall not play grown-up in a long silk train, but I shall dance and enjoy myself all the same. You will dance with me at least once—"

"Three square dances and as many waltzes, if mademoiselle permits," he interrupted, with a devoted air.

"Oh, thanks! I'll put them down on my card."

"How shall I know you, if it's going to be a masquerade?"

"Is it going to be a masquerade? How delicious!"

"I believe that is the conclusion this morning. I helped your papa write the invitations, and they said 'bal masque.'"

"Oh, joy, joy! Then I will wear a train, after all! Yes, I will play grown-up! Here comes papa," and she bounded out of the hammock light as a feather and made a dash at Mr. Laselle, who was slowly approaching, through the shrubberies, his head bowed in deep thought. "Papa, papa, what an angel you are! A bal masque! I never dreamed of anything so rap-turous," and she choked him till he gasped, with her round soft bare arms about his neck.

"You like it then, my pet?"

"Like it! The word is too tame, papa! And now—are we to go to the opera to-night? Just think of it! a real opera in our little city! I want to go, dreadfully!"

"I have a dinner-party to-night, Elfie. I hardly think we could get off in time."

"But they are only to be here three nights, and we can't go the night of the ball. Oh, I am so passionately fond of music. And I never see the opera except when you take me to New Orleans."

"I shall have to send you with Phyllis, then. I positively can't get off to-night; and your mother is afraid of the night air. I am going into town now, to engage the music for the ball, and I will buy a box for you, if you say so, and let Phyllis take charge of you."

"Thank you, papa. Cannot Mr. Chayce get away from your dinner-party in time?"

"Mr. Chayce is tired of opera, my dear. Put on the stage as it must be by a traveling company it would be no treat to him," and Laselle glanced anxiously at his visitor.

"I am afraid I cannot bear you company, Miss Elfie," said Aubrey, who knew very well that his host was really begging him to remain away for fear a certain little girl in the chorus would recognize him. "I will promise you, however—if agreeable to your papa—to come for you after the play. I can ride into town with some of the gentlemen, and be ready to bear you company home in the carriage. It will be moonlight, and I shall enjoy it wonderfully."

"Half a loaf is better than no bread," was the half-pouting reply. "Be sure you come, now; for it will be stupid coming home with only Phyllis. Papa, pet, what are you going to

give me for my birthday? I expect something very handsome! A pearl necklace, at the very least! And now, good-by for the present, gentlemen! You will not be teased by me any more until luncheon. I've got a great deal to do; I've got to go through

"An oaken chest, half-eaten by the worm—
A chest that came from Venice, and has held
The ducal robes of some old ancestor,"

to look up a costume for the *bal masque*. Chloe and Phyllis shall help me. They say my grandmother was a great beauty—if I can find one of her "rich and rare" antiquated toilets in good preservation it will be just the thing."

She danced away down a rose-wreathed alley, followed by her white kitten in full chase. The flowers and bees and butterflies saw nothing more of their kindred spirit that delicious morning; even kitty slept on the gallery floor undisturbed. A servant had ridden away on horseback with the invitations to the ball, and apologies to the ladies for the brief time given to them, as Mr. Laselle's guest was to only remain a few days.

The two gentlemen now drove into town on business and pleasure; when they returned to a late luncheon, Miss Elfie came in tardily, cobwebs on her dark hair, dust on her white frock, and an abstracted air; but, with cheeks glowing and eyes shining with success—she had found something to suit her fancy in the chests and wardrobes of ancient finery in which the house of Laselle was rich.

That evening Mr. Laselle had a fine dinner-party of a dozen gentlemen; Madame Laselle kept her room; and while the banqueters were still sitting over their wine, a slim girl in white slipped down from her dressing-room and flitted out on the piazza, followed by her shadow in the person of the stately Phyllis, madame's maid for many years.

The carriage was at the door, and Mr. Chayce was on the steps, waiting to hand Mademoiselle Elfie into it; he had heard the wheels and quit- ted the dining-room to wait upon the young lady, an attention which sent her on her way well pleased.

"See here, Phyllis, if you won't tell my parents, I'll show you what I am going to wear to night. Mamma will not allow me any jewelry; she says I am too young; but I am Miss Laselle, if I am not quite fifteen, and I shall be very conspicuous in a box. Papa would be vexed if he knew it; so you must not breathe a word. The other day he left his secretary unlocked, and I was just peeping in to get some note-paper, and I saw such a cunning little velvet box I could not resist opening it—and I found this!" she took something out of her bosom which flashed in the full moonlight—a cross set with nine large diamonds.

"Chile—chile! you ought not done took that!"

"I'm going to put it back after the ball, Phyllis. It won't hurt it to wear it, you know; and it's safe on this chain. I slipped it into my bosom, so they should not see it at home. It's been in the family a long time, I guess. It says 'Victor to Mariella,' on the back of it; I suppose 'Victor' is my handsome young uncle 'Victor' who died in the war—don't you think so, Phyllis? But I don't know who 'Mariella' is; for my uncle never married. Ah, it says, 'on our wedding-day.' Of course, then, it is some other Victor, further back in the family. I dare say it is an heirloom; but I will be careful of it; I will hide it before I leave the theater."

"An' do put it back, honey, soon's you get home, an' nebbar take it out again."

And so it happened that Claire, coming on the stage in the chorus that evening, as usual, and looking about her with eyes which had recently grown keen in their observation, saw the dark, glowing beauty of a young Southern girl beaming down on her—a girl younger than herself, though looking nearly as old, dressed in creamy white, with her dark hair wreathed with passion-flowers, gold bracelets on her smooth round arms, and depending from her graceful neck—a diamond cross.

Something familiar in the brilliant face had struck Claire before she saw and recognized the cross. A strange thrill ran like fire through her veins, though her voice swelled out without break or quiver to the end of the recitative.

"So! that is my cousin, I infer! He has given her my cross. He keeps himself out of sight, coward and traitor that he is! He fears the poor girl he robbed will accuse him of bribing a servant to chloroform her and steal away the little her father left her. He hopes the poor chorus-singer will leave the vicinity without learning that this is the parish in which Julien Laselle reigns a sort of demi-god. He does not

dream how eagerly I welcomed the happy chance of coming South, that I might familiarize myself with his surroundings. How strange it is that two brothers of one blood can be so different! What I most wonder at is that such a man can be my own father's brother. One, a hero, the soul of honor; the other, a dastard, as mean as he is cowardly—yet, sons of the same mother! She is smiling at me. She has a lovely face, full of soul and expression. What would she say if I walked up close under the box and told her I was her own cousin—if I stretched out my hand and seizing that cross, asserted my ownership? She is a dainty darling, I know; every step of hers is guarded by love and power. Even that colored maid looks at her with adoring eyes. Ah me! poor, poor little Claire! I could weep for self-pity!—yet, I would not have her father for my father, not for all his wealth! At least I am a hero's daughter. Julien Laselle shall hear from me before I leave this place. He shall give me back my own. That *bal masque* must have been arranged for my benefit! And Aubrey Chayce is with him! He, too, remains in the background! Oh, I would despise him if I could, but I cannot—I cannot! I love him!"

While these thoughts ran through her brain, Elsie was looking and smiling at her, and murmuring to Phyllis:

"What a lovely girl! So very young, so pale, so sad! I wish I knew her! She looks as if she had a history. I wonder if she likes having to sing for a living! If I could, I would speak to her."

Then the chorus trooped off the stage, and Elsie, during the intermission between the acts, thought of her drive home by moonlight by the side of Aubrey Chayce and was secretly, silently happy.

He came for her, as he had promised. Chatting gayly to him as the horses trotted swiftly through the perfumed night, she confided to him the fact, among other things, that there was a pretty young creature in the chorus—not much older than herself—to whom she had taken a violent fancy.

"I am glad you were not there, Mr. Chayce," she said, *naively*; "you might have fallen as deeply in love with her as I did."

"I am engaged," was the mock-solemn answer. "I cannot possibly fall in love, now; until the little lady grows up whom I have promised to marry."

Again the rose-color swept up to Elsie's brow; but it vanished in sudden fright, when Phyllis leaned over to her and whispered:

"Ah, missa, honey, where's your diamond cross?"

CHAPTER VII.

A GUEST WHO WAS NOT INVITED.

"Tis an evening of gala and festival,
Music and passion and light."

He was a Prince with golden hair
(In a palace beside the sea)

And I but a poor mermaid—
And how should he care for me?

—OWEN MEREDITH.

THE *bal masque* had been in progress several hours, yet Aubrey Chayce had not discovered Elsie amid the throng of sylphs, fairies, queens, gipsies, flower-girls and historical characters which surrounded him. This surprised, and even piqued him; for he had not supposed the child would have the wit or the self-denial to keep herself unknown. Whenever he saw a slim figure he would ask the owner of it to dance, expecting Elsie's bewitching laugh to betray her; yet, so far, not a sign had mademoiselle given by which he might recognize her.

In truth, Elsie had not been in good spirits since the visit to the opera; the loss of the diamond cross preyed upon her in secret; she feared the moment when her father should discover its absence from his secretary and begin to ask questions. She dreaded his anger, which, even to her, his favorite, was something quite appalling, when once it flashed out. Not even the prospect of the masquerade could quite make her happy.

"May I have the pleasure of this waltz with you, fair burglar—or burglaress?" asked a tall black domino, with a low laugh.

It was Aubrey, who, weary with much dancing, had been resting a few moments in his host's study—a room which chanced to be nearly deserted—fanning himself cool, breathing in the rich odor of the jasmine at the window, and dreamily listening to the soft, quick beat—beat—of the palpitating music, when he had been surprised by the stealthy manner in which a slender figure, robed as a Gipsy, glided

in, glanced about, and not perceiving him where he lay on the lounge, proceeded, rapidly and cautiously to try one key after another of a bunch which she took from her pocket in the lock of the secretary, until she found one which fitted, opened the writing-leaf which turned down over several compartments, and began hurriedly searching them.

At first Aubrey had been inclined to check this bold proceeding; but, noting the slight form, the slender little feet and the seeming familiarity of the person with the room, he had chuckled to himself, thinking—"Now, I have found you, Miss Elsie, and I will let you know it," and gliding across the room he had spoken suddenly over her shoulder:

"May I have the pleasure of this waltz with you, fair burglar?"

The girl started back with a suppressed cry, but, before it had more than passed her lips recovered herself and retorted lightly:

"Dark domino, I will consider your proposition, when I have finished my search for the magic candlestick of Aladdin secreted in this place by one who would hide it from its rightful owner."

Was it Elsie's voice? Aubrey thought so, yet he was not certain. She continued to turn over every paper, to look in every drawer; but she evidently did not find that which she desired; and, hearing a tumult of invading promenaders, she quickly shut the leaf down and took the domino's arm.

A full band of music was stationed on one of the piazzas, and every door and window being open it could be heard everywhere, so that dancing was going on in halls and galleries and porches as well as in the parlors. Aubrey took his partner out on one of the long piazzas. He was a famous waltzer, and he soon found that he had a companion worthy of his skill; thistle-down could not have floated more lightly than this exquisite dancer. Around and around and up and down they whirled and glided, until dozens of other couples had gathered to watch their wonderful skill.

Was this Elsie or was it not? Aubrey questioned as he spun round with the light figure in his arms. The light, the slender proportions, the smallness of the twinkling feet were like Elsie's; and who else would have made so free with her father's secretary? Surely those were eyes of midnight darkness which flashed on him through the silken mask!

"I did not dream the little witch could hold her tongue so long!" he said to himself. "She is playing hide-and-seek quite successfully."

"Shall we walk about the grounds awhile?" he asked, when the music came to a pause. "They look as if they had been taken out of some fairy-land and set down here for a few hours to shame our workaday world. How enchanting! And how kind of Mr. Laselle to give us such a treat. A *bal masque* is just the thing for you Southerners; at the North it would not be half such a success. People who indulge in the delights of Mardi-Gras take to masquerading naturally. You have the enthusiasm—the quick fancy—the love of pleasure which give the charm to the attempt. My pretty Gipsy, you dance like a fairy. You are the best partner I ever had. Ah!" with a mock sentimental sigh, "if life were but a round of waltzing, it would be evident that you and I were made for each other! Here we are, all alone behind this group of oleanders; let me remove that 'envious mask' one instant; I am perishing of curiosity to look in those eyes:

"Love, if thy tresses be so dark,
How dark those hidden eyes must be!"

He made as if he would tear away the mask; she shrunk back, but without letting go his arm, saying hurriedly in low tones:

"No, no, no! I am not her you imagine me to be. Let me have a few moments more of life—of happiness—the only hour of complete and perfect content in my whole life. I can live upon the memory of it a long time. Look around, Sir Domino, upon our magic environments; are they not too lovely to be real?"

She hung upon his arm; a soft sigh heaved her bosom; her companion thrilled at the passionate tones of her low sweet voice.

What did she mean? Was it *his company* which made this hour the supreme one of her life? Or, was it only the witching beauty of the scene? Aubrey Chayce had been used to flattery—to having women worship him as a demi-god—to finding himself irresistible; why, then, was his soul stirred by this girlish voice as the leaves over his head were stirred and thrilled by the low, perfumed wind?

"I wish you would remove your mask," he

whispered, pressing her little hand against his side.

"No, no! Oh, that this hour might last forever!"

"It certainly is very pleasant—to me," he responded, gallantly; he was certain now that it was not Elsie he had on his arm.

There was a moment's silence between them. The band had begun playing; the passionate waltz music throbbed through the moonlit air: the long alleys glittered with lanterns gleaming thick as fireflies everywhere; the night air was heavy with a hundred subtle, mingling perfumes of orange-flowers and violets, roses and carnations, magnolias and lemon-groves; through the garden walks flitted knights and cavaliers, princesses and fairy-queens; nothing seemed real; the glamour of the time was over Aubrey as well as his fair companion.

"If I could see your face I would have a picture of you to keep and take back with me to my Northern home," he urged.

"I will tell you something," she began, in tremulous tones, "if you will first give me your word of honor that you will not seek to find out who I am."

"That is a hard condition."

"Do you promise?"

"If I must."

"I love you, Aubrey Chayce. There, I have said it!" drawing a deep breath of relief.

"Many, many women have told you so. It does not move you so much as it would if that night-moth were to light on your hand, I know that. I have no hope—not the least. I have never pictured my love returned; it would not be so sweet, so holy to me if I did not know the utter sacrifice of it. I love you. I shall love you and you only so long as I live. If I could die for you, some time, to save you a headache, I would do it. To have been with you a whole hour is more joy than I hoped for. It is the first, last, only time. And now, good-by, good-by!"

The soft little hand slipped away from his arm; she stood apart from him, with drooped head. If Aubrey had not been a man of honor, he would have snatched away the bit of silk that hid from him the face of one who had spoken such words; but his word was given and he would not break it. Many women had loved, or fancied they loved, him—that was true; yet, something in the way this one had made her strange avowal stirred his soul with the fancy that perhaps, if he knew her, he might be able to return her love.

"I do not want to give you up, entirely," he stammered. "Give me something which may be a token between us, if some time it may chance that you desire it. Here is this ring from my hand; I give it to you in the hope that some time you may return it, with no hateful mask over that lovely face."

He lifted her hand and slipped on the second finger a ring, set with a large ruby, which he had drawn from his little finger; it flashed like a drop of fire in the moonlight; she loosened from the bosom of her scarlet jacket a knot of ribbon.

Some one came flying down the white-glittering shell path—a shrieking fairy pursued by a sea-monster, who flung herself straight into the black domino's arms with a cry of pretended terror, and he knew that this was Elsie.

"Shall I slay the dragon, you poor little sprite? I have a dagger, worn for self-defense, and if you say so, I will stretch him at your feet."

"Yes, kill him stone-dead this instant!" cried the fairy; then added, in the domino's ear:

"It is papa. Isn't he splendidly gotten-up? He wore that costume once, in New Orleans, during the carnival. You are a naughty, naughty, stupid man, Mr. Chayce, not to have made me out long ago. I have danced with you three times, and oh, what a flirt you are! You don't seem to remember at all that you have promised to wait for me! Oh, go away, go away, you dreadful sea-dragon!"

"Not until I have made a supper off you, my dainty fairy. You are just the right age to be tender eating, and I am horridly hungry. They are about to have refreshments in the marquee on the lawn, Sir Domino. Will you aid me in disposing of this little girl?"

Aubrey looked about for the Gipsy, but she had vanished; and there was nothing for him to do but to follow his host and Elsie to the tent where an elegant supper was being served. He remained here a long time in hope that he should again see the Gipsy where so many were coming and going; but not a glimpse did he obtain of her.

"It might be sweeter than I dream to be

loved by a little girl like that," he mused. "Her low, smooth, rich voice thrilled me as no voice ever before did. I feel a vague want—a restless desire to hear it again. *Quien sabe?* I might have found the right one at last! How provoking, to be adored by such a fascinating mystery! I shall fall in love with her, just because I am so tantalized!" and he slyly pressed the scarlet ribbon to his lips.

Tired of watching for one who came not, he had just made his way out into the cool air of the garden from the crowded tent, and was sauntering down a flower-bordered alley debating whether or not to dance again after that delicious waltz he had had with her, when loud cries and the sound of a pistol-shot coming from the house, startled him. As he turned to look, some one darted past him, fleet as an antelope—a girl attired as "Night," with a silver crescent on her dark hair and stars glittering over the dark blue of her long flowing train.

If he had stretched out his hand he could have arrested her; but he did not realize what was wanted until she had plunged into a flowering thicket of shrubs and disappeared. Instantly several gentlemen, in their fantastic costumes, hurried by, with two or three servants, shouting, "Stop thief! Stop thief!" "Where is she?" "What has she done?" "Stop the robber," and so on.

All was fierce excitement for a few minutes; then, the scaly sea-dragon came panting back, followed closely by his confidential servant, Pierre, and seeing the black domino, stopped short.

"Is any one hurt? Who fired a pistol? What's the matter?" asked Aubrey, bewildered.

"I don't know who fired the pistol," answered the master of the house. "Good God, I would not fire at her! I hope to Heaven she is not hurt! She passed you, did she not? She might rob me, but I would not do her bodily injury. Pierre, did you fire the shot?"

"Yes, mastah. I seen her open your secretary an' take papers an' things. I put my han' on her shoulder an' tol' her to give 'em up; she jus' bounded fru de window like a bird, an' I followed. Course I fired, to scare her, massah—fired in de air, jus' to frighten her."

Mr. Laselle had removed his domino; he looked very pale, and was quivering all over. Pierre, too, was bleached to the color of tallow. Others came gathering around.

"What is it? What has happened?"

"Nothing of much consequence, friends," answered the host. "Some woman—the pal of burglars, probably—must have come into the house under the guise of an invited guest. Pierre detected her, after she had broken open my secretary, and gave the alarm. If you will excuse me, I will go and examine to see what harm is done," and he passed on into the house.

The black domino was left standing by a white rose-bush in full bloom, thinking, in a puzzled way, over certain events of the evening. He had seen some one at the secretary. He had supposed it to be Elsie; afterward, when he learned that it was not Elsie, he had thought little about it. Now, it troubled him. The girl at the secretary was the same who had told him she loved him—about whom he had begun to weave a romantic tenderness and interest. She was dressed as a Gipsy. This other one, who had fled past him a few moments ago, and who had been accused of robbery, was not the Gipsy at all, but a person dressed as "Night." Yet it was strange that two of them should have taken an unlawful interest in that secretary! Were they in league to rob the house during the *bal masque*? Had he been duped? The more he pondered, the more puzzled he grew.

Meantime, a strange scene was taking place in the "study" of Julien Laselle. He and his servant, Pierre, had hurried back to that room, anxious to ascertain if the robber had secured the spoil for which she came. Very well both of them knew what that spoil was! Very well they knew this was no common thievery—though they were desirous of having it appear so to others.

Hurriedly they reentered the study; which was full of people who had rushed in at the first alarm. Some one was sitting in a chair in front of the open secretary—a person who had been conspicuous all the evening as the "devil" of the masquerade. Was there ever a *bal masque* without his Satanic majesty? Certainly—this one was no exception to the rule. He had been very lively during the night, exciting curiosity as to who he was; no one, not even the host, having been able to make out his identity. At supper the guests had unmasked; this guest had not been to supper, nor observed the custom of unmasking. He sat there, looking very sinister,

in his Satanic mask and dress. Perhaps the sight of him, sitting there so close to his private papers, irritated Julien Laselle, or excited his suspicions; he went quickly up to the man.

"Why do you not unmask, sir?" he demanded, and, almost rudely, he tore the silk from the face of the stranger.

"*Qu'importe?*" asked the man, looking him full in the face; and Julien Laselle, with a cry, fainted dead away in his servant's arms.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE OLEANDERS.

But 'tis hard, when by lamplight, 'mid laughter and songs, too,

Those return . . . we have buried and mourned for and prayed for,

And done with. —OWEN MEREDITH.

THE sudden illness of the host had the effect of breaking up the ball, which would soon have come to a close, it being already between two and three in the morning. The flying guests paid their parting compliments to Mrs. Laselle, who, though taking no active part in the entertainment, had assumed the character of Queen of the Festival, and spent the evening on her "throne" in the parlor, a luxurious chair on a raised dais, where her elegant black velvet dress and the Laselle jewels were exhibited to the best advantage.

Mr. Chayce and Pierre exerted themselves to restore Mr. Laselle. The man, whose unmasking had evidently been a shock to him, had immediately leaped through the window and disappeared. No one had attempted to restrain him. The general impression of the guests—which was conveyed to madame, also, to allay her agitation—was, that a daring attempt had been made, by professional burglars, to rob their host's house by taking advantage of the opportunities of the *bal masque*. It was supposed that a large sum of money had been taken from the secretary, and that Mr. Laselle must have recognized his Satanic majesty as some well known desperado, and, being subject to attacks of vertigo, the excitement had brought one on. Mrs. Laselle was congratulated on the fact that her wearing of her jewels had probably saved them. Threats of lynching were breathed by gayly-attired cavaliers, should the burglars fall into their hands, as they rode away by twos and threes, in the waning moonlight, through the still, sweet-scented night.

"There! you are better, my friend. Take it easy," quietly spoke Aubrey, as Mr. Laselle came out of his fainting-fit and found himself lying flat on the floor in an atmosphere of eau-de-cologne and smelling-salts. "Do not disturb yourself. Every one has gone."

Laselle insisted on raising himself on his elbow and looking about.

"Strange—strange—strange," he muttered, over and over, like one half out of his senses.

"Pierre! Pierre, are you there?"

"Yes, mastah."

"Did you see him, Pierre?"

"De bugbla, mastah?"

"The man sitting by my desk!—the devil?"

"Oh, yes, mastah, I seen him plain as I see Mistah Chayce."

"Who was he?"

"You got me dere, mastah. It wa'n't no gentleman of this neighborhood, wot I carried de invitations to. 'Spec's it was some States-prison bird wot wants to get back in his cage;" then, stooping, so as to whisper in his master's ear, he added: "Likely she bro't' him 'long to help her—one dem theater chaps, I take it."

Julien Laselle groaned, impatiently, and sat up on the floor.

"If you will help me, Pierre, I will get on my feet. I must look in my desk to see what is gone."

He was aided to the chair by the secretary, and gave a keen examination to the contents of the various drawers.

"The papers are all right; they did not have time to secure them," he exclaimed, joyfully.

Aubrey thought he meant bonds or greenbacks, for he knew nothing of those tell-tale, stolen letters.

"But the cross is gone!" was the cry, the next moment.

The loss excited him far more than Chayce could understand. An ornament like that, however richly jeweled, ought not to shake the nerves of a wealthy planter by its loss.

It pained the younger gentleman to see Mr. Laselle so deeply disturbed, and, saying that he would walk a few minutes in the fresh air, he lighted a cigar and strolled out along the garden walks, where the lanterns were expiring, one by one, and the roses and lilies sleeping in the soft darkness, for the moon had set.

In a few moments he came to the group of oleanders where he had stood when the Gipsy girl, clinging to his arm with her soft, tender little hand, had told her strange, sweet, flattering story. The spell of that hour returned upon Aubrey Chayce; he seemed to feel the little clinging hand, to hear the rich low voice.

"By Jove, I would give a year of my life to see her face!" he murmured. "I have never yet asked a woman to marry me; perhaps I should have done that foolish thing, had I looked upon her face. It was lovely, I know. I noted the smooth throat, the delicate ear, the rounded chin. Well, here is a romance for you, Aubrey! It will add a vague melancholy to my too prosperous days to feel that *somewhere, somebody* is pining herself to death for me!" and he laughed, but not with his usual scorn of sentiment.

He stood a few moments quite still, staring up at the great golden stars; his cigar had gone out; the breath of the coming morning began to stir in the oleanders and to sigh amid the sweet clusters of orange-buds and jasmine flowers. The dark which comes before the dawn was not very deep, for the stars glittered in tropical glory; Aubrey could see quite plainly, when a tall figure stole out of an alley of syringas, looked about, and came toward the very spot where he was standing, hidden by the oleanders. As the man passed him, Aubrey reached out an arm—strengthened by much athletic exercise—and took a firm gripe of the intruder.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Minding my own business," was the crisp answer, "which I should advise you to do, likewise."

The tones were those of a refined person; but the situation was suspicious; there had been unlawful intruders at Belle-Rivière that night, and Chayce was minded to hold on.

"At least give me your name," he said, resolutely.

"With all the pleasure in the world, sir. My name is Rex Diable. Common courtesy demands that you give me yours in return."

"Ah! you are the person who was at my friend's desk!"

"You put a wrong construction upon the fact that I was sitting near it, which was a matter of chance. I have done several singular things in the course of a rather curious experience, but I never did steal a dollar, I give you my word of honor. The agitation caused to Mr. Julien Laselle by a sight of my countenance was not the fear that I had robbed him. Perhaps he did not like the cut of my features; at least, I am blameless, for I kept on my mask until he insisted, you know."

"You had better come back to the house with me."

"I beg your pardon, I do not think so."

"I insist. I would hardly be doing my duty to let you go, until I hear his wishes from Mr. Laselle."

"I don't think he cares to see me again."

"At least, we can ask him," and Chayce, who had not slackened his gripe of the other's arm, shouted for Pierre, Scipio, Davis, to come to his assistance.

"You are quite an athlete," panted the other, as the two men struggled together. "I admire your training. *Au revoir*, my young friend," and he threw Aubrey plump into the crashing oleanders. "I could have shot you; but I didn't care to," and he disappeared.

Aubrey felt a little ashamed of his defeat as a couple of colored men came running up; he explained that he had caught one of the robbers, but that the fellow had got away. The servants were too cowardly to go in search, keeping him close company as he returned to the house.

"I'm really much obliged to him for not shooting me," thought the young man, as he at last sought his bed, and smiling to himself he repeated the words of Maud's lover, in a sleepy undertone:

"But, if I be dear to some one else
Then I should be to myself more dear.
Shall I not take care of all that I think,
Yea, even of wretched meat and drink,
If I be dear,
If I be dear to some one else?"

See, little Gipsy, how careful you are making me of my precious self."

The next day was the last of Aubrey Chayce's visit to Belle-Rivière. Elsie had on a woe-begone expression, and teased her papa to beg him to stay; but Julien Laselle was not in the high spirits he had been before last night's adventure; he was pale, moody and irritable, though he made a great effort to conceal his ill-temper from his guest, and did urge him to re-

main with a warmth which was not assumed.

When Elfie found that their guest was in earnest about leaving she flew to her father to get him to take her and go with Mr. Chayce at least to New Orleans.

"You promised, before he came, papa," she urged; "and I need to go to the city to shop—and mamma says I may—and it will be so lovely!" clasping her hands. "Phyllis will take good care of me. Oh, do say 'yes!'"

Mr. Laselle had business of importance in New Orleans; yet he had suddenly grown strangely loth to leave Belle-Rivière. However, Elfie's tears settled the matter; he promised to go.

That afternoon the master dispatched Pierre to town on a private errand—to learn by what boat the opera company expected to go to New Orleans. The servant returned with the information that the troupe were going on the "Florida," the following morning. This induced Laselle to state to Chayce that he could not get ready to leave the next day, so the latter consented to tarry twenty-four hours longer, to give his friend time to complete his preparations.

"Man proposes, God disposes." When the little party from the plantation went on board the steamer on the second day, at the last moment—having been belated by the breaking of an axle—Laselle discovered, as the wheels began to splash, that the opera company was on board; it had been delayed by the illness of one of the members.

He soon made another and far more discomposing discovery—that the man was on the boat who had so startled him the night of the *bal masque*, and that he had joined the troupe of singers!

CHAPTER IX.

NOT TO BE SHAKEN OFF.

Methought the dead man, rising from his tomb,
Frowned on me. —MATURIN.

"It will be awkward for Laselle, having that girl on board," thought Aubrey, when he, too, made the discovery of the troupe being on the steamer; but, Claire never once made her appearance at the table or in the saloon; it was rumored that she had taken cold and was not well enough to leave her state-room.

"You see, she has decency enough not to steal my name, down here, where it is known and honored," Laselle remarked to Chayce, as they walked the deck together. "I see she is on the bills as Claire Mason—which is more like it!"

"Why trouble yourself so much about it?" asked his young friend, carelessly, knowing no reason why the existence of the little chorus-singer should so deeply disturb the proud planter. "Since she does not thrust herself upon your notice, why remember there is such a person?"

"Why, indeed?" thought the planter, grinding his heel into the deck. "You are right; I will not mention her again," he said, aloud.

Yet his excitement continued and increased; he grew paler and paler as they continued their promenade; his lips were compressed, the nails of his fingers were pressed deeply into his palms.

Elfie came out, a lovely little traveler, with her sailor's hat set coquettishly on the back of her head, her cheeks red as damask roses, her soft, large eyes lit up into a blaze of splendor by the excitement of the journey, and the joy of being with Aubrey Chayce. She clung to his arm; she uttered a hundred foolish, trifling nothings, that were yet charming, falling from such pretty lips.

"Everybody is admiring us; we are the three handsomest people on the boat," she declared, in a laughing whisper. "You need not shake your wise head, Mr. Chayce; you know you are perfectly, perfectly beautiful! All the ladies are envying me—look about, and see if it is not so! Every one smiles at us but that dark gentleman sitting alone by the bow, and even he never takes his eyes off us. Do you know who he is, papa?"

"No, Elfie," was the curt answer. "I wish to heaven I did!" he added, under his breath. "I never was so strangely impressed. I wish he would stop his staring; it is enough to unsettle one's nerves. Now, the other night I could have sworn—but no, now that I see him again, in this strong light, I understand that I must have been over-fatigued and ill, my mind in a morbid condition, which made me fancy what had no reality except in my heated brain. I am glad I have seen him again, for it puts my fears at rest. There certainly is a wonderful resemblance; but not more so than I have observed between utter

strangers. He is almost the exact living image of what my uncle, in Cuba, was when I saw him last, twelve years ago. My uncle is dead, leaving no relative nearer than myself. Ten thousand demons! I wish the man would take his eyes off me a little while! I would sooner, any moment, face a ghost in a graveyard! It is insulting to be so stared at. I've half a mind to slap his face!"

Yet, Julien Laselle would just as soon have struck with his trembling hands some impalpable phantom watching him with its cold regard, as this silent, imperturbable stranger, who continued to pierce him through with his inscrutable gaze. It was a strange gaze—not threatening, not even sarcastic, nor yet angry, but calm and searching, as if it asked one silent question which the eyes of the other must, sooner or later, truthfully answer.

It became unbearable to Julien Laselle; excusing himself to his two companions, he retreated to his state-room, where he threw himself down and buried his face in a pillow, like a nervous girl.

"Oh, Mr. Chayce," Elfie rattled on, as they continued their promenade together—it was late in the afternoon, and a cool, delicious air was ruffling the dull stream, bringing gusts of sweetness from the shore—"do you know, those singers are on board? but I don't see the one in whom I took such an interest—a lovely young girl, not much older than I am. If she would come on deck I would introduce myself. I know she is good, for she looks so; and I'd like to be friends with her. Only, I should be frightfully jealous if you admired her, too!—and so it is best as it is," with a heavy sigh. "Don't forget—don't dare to forget—after you leave us, that you have promised to wait for me!" holding up a warning finger.

"What if I remember and you forget, Elfie?"

"I shall remember," she assured him, earnestly.

"Ladies older than you have been known to change their minds."

"Ah, but I never shall change mine! I am not half such a little girl as you think I am. I am just as much in earnest as if I were twenty—and I know papa is, too. He told me he would rather I married you than any other man in the world."

"It was a jest—and a poor one," murmured Aubrey, actually embarrassed. "People often say such things in jest. Why, when I was six years old I was promised to a little lady of a week, by my father. She died of scarlet fever when she was three. Perhaps that is why I have never thought of marrying," laughing.

Elfie looked at him earnestly a minute; some of the radiance went out of her face, some of the gladness out of her voice.

"Well, if you ever do think of marrying," she said, timidly, "I shall be ready; I shall not forget."

Aubrey changed the subject; soon she was laughing and teasing again, apparently as much of a child as a girl of ten.

"She is desperately pretty," thought her companion. "If she keeps her promise of beauty perhaps I shall be glad to have her remember! Elfie, Elfie, you are rightly named. Who were you honoring by that naughty face you just made up?"

"That personage who has been watching us as if we were mice and he were a cat. I gave him to understand I did not like his impertinence," said Miss Beauty, with a curl of her scarlet lips.

Aubrey gave a passing glance at the stranger, little dreaming this was Rex Diable, with whom he had wrestled in the starlit garden of Belle-Rivière, two nights before. Had the man spoken he would have recognized the voice; but the unknown did not speak, and so the Northerner made no discovery.

There was another pair of eyes watching the beautiful couple who paced the deck, happy and careless—watching them with an observation quite different from that of the other travelers.

Claire, with her forehead pressed to the closed shutter of her state-room window, could see, through the slats, without being seen.

"How strange it is," she thought, bitterly, "that she is the one to win what I so madly long for! Is it not enough that this cousin of mine has beauty, and wealth, and pride of birth, and parents who idolize even her follies—is it not enough, without her winning Aubrey Chayce? God knows I have no hope of his loving me; but it is almost too bitter to find him here, with her! Oh, why, in this ill-balanced world does one have *all*—the other *nothing*?"

She put her hand in the bosom of her dress

and drew out a diamond cross and a ruby ring, both of which she kissed.

"These are my 'talismans,'" she murmured. "They shall inspire me—give me courage to dare—to aspire—to win honor and fame which shall raise me to be their equals! In a few years I will stand on the dizzy heights of success! Lovers will beg the favor of a smile from me—jewels will be flung in my lap by emperors—flowers will be thrown down for my foot to press! Why should I envy this little dark Southern girl? God knows I envy her nothing except the chance of winning *him*."

Meantime, in the room adjoining her own, the man who should have been her friend and protector, lay groaning and restless, until his many friends on board became so pressing in their demands to see him, that he went out into the saloon. There were a large number of passengers on board the Florida; there was also the widow of a Confederate officer, in destitute circumstances; and several of the "prominent citizens" of Louisiana had already besought the manager of the opera troupe to give a benefit for her, after supper, in the saloon. Mr. Bright, with a view to future interests, readily consented to improvise a concert.

This concerned Claire very little, as the chorus had only to sing once in the closing piece. The manager came to inquire after her health and to urge her to appear if possible—Claire had taken cold during that night's wild adventure at the *bal masque*—for he was always proud of her exquisitely pretty figure and lovely face, and did not like being cheated out of any chance of displaying them in his chorus.

"And do dress yourself tastefully, my dear," said wise Mr. Bright, patting his little favorite on the head. "So much depends on dress. I will have your trunk sent into your state-room. I'd like all you girls to wear white, with fresh roses for ornaments; the captain has promised to obtain the roses at the next landing. You need not come out to tea, my dear; I'll have a nice little supper sent in to you. That new fellow who has taken Blake's place as traveling-agent promises to be a jewel; he has the *knack* of doing things. His name is Rex. I'll introduce him to you, the first opportunity."

Claire was not sure that she disliked the excitement of the concert; at first, on coming on board, she had shrunk from the idea of being seen by her proud uncle; now she changed her mind and resolved to triumph over him in one little matter which she felt would excite his anger. She dressed herself with the utmost care, as Mr. Bright had requested, yet very simply.

A fresh white dress, with a large bunch of roses at the belt—roses in her rich dark hair; that was not much of a toilet, but it suited her pure loveliness better than anything more elaborate; then, with trembling hands, she fastened about her white neck the slender gold chain to which the diamond cross was attached; the wearing of that before the eyes of the haughty planter who had robbed her of it was to be her triumph.

"He will not venture to snatch it from me, for he will not like to provoke my explanation in public," she reasoned.

When all was complete she threw a light shawl around her, which hid the cross, and joined the rest of the chorus, waiting until they were summoned to appear before the enthusiastic audience whom they heard applauding to the echo the solo singers.

It was the new traveling-agent, Rex, who came to give them the order of their appearance on the improvised stage.

"There she is! Look, papa, Mr. Chayce! did I not tell you she was just the sweetest, dearest little thing that ever was? And her voice—listen to that!—a pure, glorious soprano! She won't be in the chorus long, with such a voice as that! Tell me, papa, isn't she just too perfectly lovely?"

A cold sweat broke out on the forehead of Julien Laselle. He did not hear a word that his daughter said, until she suddenly whispered hurriedly in his ear:

"And oh, how strange! She has on a cross exactly like the one that was taken from your desk!"

"How do you know, Elfie?" he asked her, sternly. "I never showed that cross to you," and then Elfie blushed scarlet to think she had betrayed herself and relapsed into silence.

Laselle gritted his teeth with impotent rage to think that girl had succeeded, and dared to flaunt her triumph in his face; but his rage gave place to an uneasiness deeper than Claire had any power to make him feel, when his rest-

less eyes, roving about in search of a certain person, saw that person, too, with a pale, frowning face and his gaze glued to the diamond cross.

"The game is up," he muttered between his clenched teeth. "I am a ruined man. When those two get their heads together it will be in vain for me to deny that I had the card up my sleeve."

The group of gentlemen and ladies, of whom the party from Belle-Rivière made the brilliant center, wondered at the silence and pallor of the usually genial Laselle. Chayce believed the presence of the chorus-singer had disturbed him; but why he should allow himself to be so deeply annoyed he could not understand.

In a few minutes the chorus had done its part; the saloon rung with warm applause; all the flowers not yet flung to the two *prima donnas* were cast at the little feet of Claire, who gave one flashing glance of triumph straight at the pale-faced planter, smiled sweetly, courtesied with the finished grace of Nilsson herself, and calmly allowed Rex to gather up her "floral tributes," which he was doing, when the curtain came down.

Rex had picked up the flowers as an excuse to speak to Claire; she did not notice the movement until it was too late to prevent it—he had come close to her, and taking her cross in his finger, had turned it over and read the inscription; his lips trembled uncontrollably, as he asked:

"How did you come by this?"

Claire, hastily taking it from his hold, hid it in her bosom; she looked him full in the face with her lovely eyes.

It is no present from some foolish admirer, Mr. Rex, as you may think. I have never accepted a gift of greater value than these flowers."

"It is very valuable," he continued, hastily.

"You never bought it?"

"You are right, sir. You have no business to ask, but I will tell you—my father gave it to my mother on their wedding-day. It was her dying gift to me, their only child. Now, do you question my right to wear it?"

"Your father?" he repeated, devouring her lovely face with eager, luminous eyes—"your father—your father?"

She shrunk from him, his manner was so strange, feeling a sensation of relief when Mr. Bright came up to thank her "for looking so pretty;" but, Mr. Rex still remained at her side, on the pretense of holding her bouquets. She was quite certain that his hands were shaking, and began to feel a vague alarm, until, on Mr. Bright's turning away, he said to her, in a low, stealthy voice:

"If your father was Colonel Victor Laselle, I used to be a comrade of his in the army. Where is he now?"

"Surely," she cried, the tears rushing to her eyes, "if you knew my father, in the army, you would know that he is dead! Colonel Victor Laselle died, like the noble soldier that he was, on the field of battle, fighting for the Lost Cause. He died the death of a brave man! Strange, that you did not know it, if you knew him!" Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shone with a sudden fire, a proud smile lighted up her face. "My father was a hero," she added, "and I glory in his memory!"

The man she addressed stood with his eyes bent on the floor; a red spot came out in his sal-low cheeks; his head drooped; it was as if he stood rebuked because he, too, had not died for his country; he could no longer look this glowing, eloquent young girl in the face. At last he murmured, in the same low voice:

"I would to God that I, too, had died on the battle-field, and had a daughter like you to honor my memory. There are worse things than death to meet. Mademoiselle Claire, I did not know that I had a heart, yet you have moved my breast to strange emotions. I honor you; I am deeply interested in you—I pray that, for the sake of the old friendship between your father and me, you will allow me to be your friend."

"Thank you, Mr. Rex," she said, coldly—she still did not understand why it was he had not known of Colonel Laselle's death, since he asserted that he was a friend of his. "I need true friends sadly enough," and taking her bouquets from him, she went away to her state-room, while he walked rapidly out on deck, and striking his forehead with his hand, looked up at the stars with a hollow laugh.

"Brave, beautiful child!" he whispered. "How it thrilled me to hear her praise that dead father whom she has exalted into a hero! It would be cruel—cruel—to tumble her hero

from his pedestal! Better she should never know the truth!"

CHAPTER X.

DRIFTING.

I know, by the blush which rises
And shadows her soul-lit cheek;
For, through all Love's sweet disguises
A blush will be sure to speak. —OSGOOD

WHEN she went off the boat the following morning little Claire had a heavy, heavy heart. Under the burning blue southern sky she felt as if light and bloom had faded out of the world.

"Here," she said to herself, "our paths part. When shall I see him again? Perhaps not for months—or years—or never! Ah, little he guesses I have his ruby ring here, safe in my bosom! He would scorn me if he knew. One happy hour I have had. Nothing can deprive me of that while I have my senses left me. Oh, magic hour of dew, perfume, moonlight, rapture! Will I ever show him the ring? Mad, happy hope! Who knows? Nilsson was a poor girl—so was Albani—why may not I get to be all they are?"—she stood on deck, with others of the company, while Mr. Bright and Rex were fuming over the baggage.

An elegant carriage stood on the levee into which Mr. Chayce was handing the youthful heiress of Belle Rivière; he followed and sat by her side, evidently obeying a motion of Mr. Laselle's hand, who took his place on a front seat.

The handsome Northerner looked his best beside the dark little beauty of the plantation. Elsie turned her witching face to the boat, bowing and smiling gay farewells to the acquaintances there, and catching sight of her favorite among the chorus-singers clustered on deck, she gave Claire a particularly dazzling smile and blew her a kiss from the tips of her dainty fingers just as the carriage rolled away.

Rex had come up to the girl's side, meantime.

"Do you know Miss Laselle?" he asked her, in surprise, noting Elsie's familiar action and dazzling patronage.

"No; I have never spoken to her. She seems to have taken a fancy to my singing."

"Strange things happen in this world! That young lady is a Laselle, too. Is she any relation of yours?"

"Are you a Yankee?" retorted Claire. "You have a talent for asking questions! I believe she is a cousin of mine, if the truth were told. She, however, is not aware of the disgraceful fact, and I am too proud to proclaim it. I despise my uncle too thoroughly to care to intrude the relationship on his daughter."

"You despise that man who has just gone!"—Rex burst into a sudden laugh so rude as to offend Claire. "I beg your pardon, Miss Mason, but the idea struck me singularly. I can correct a mistaken impression of yours, however; Miss Elsie Laselle is *not* your cousin!"

Claire turned away from the meddlesome agent with a cold smile.

"That is like your not knowing my father was dead," she said, and began to talk with one of her companions; she did not feel drawn toward this Mr. Rex though he had made her an open offer of friendship.

However, she could not long doubt that he was in earnest in this offer; there were a hundred ways in which he could do her small services, and he never failed in one. Big Flannigan, in the chilly Northern city, recalling the little singer to memory as he paced the walk at night, would have been pleased to know she had found an attendant as faithful as himself. Rex watched over her health, her comfort, her safety; more than that, he gradually made himself a companion and confidant. Claire lost her first dislike of him, learning to depend on him as on an elder brother.

Their intimacy first began by her asking him a thousand and one questions about her dear father's army life. He was able to tell her everything up to a short time before that fatal Battle of the Wilderness.

"I left the army about that time," he said, "and the country, too. I was in despair about the cause, and I had personal troubles, and the two drove me to leave the States. I had an opportunity to go to South America, and there I remained for many years, hearing nothing of what was happening to my friends. For instance, when I went away, the Laselles were poor—very poor. Their father had failed and died; the plantation was a wilderness; their slaves stampeded, there was nothing of their grandeur left. Now, on my return, I find Julien

rolling in wealth and Belle-Rivière an earthly paradise."

"Did you know Julien?"

"Not very well," evasively.

"I was surprised, too, to find him in such splendid circumstances."

"I have heard," Rex went on, "that an uncle in Cuba left him sole heir to immense estates. That accounts for the change."

But it was not for a long time to come that Claire became so confidential with this man as to reveal to him the reason of her bitterness toward her uncle—that he had tried to throw disgrace upon her birth, doubtless with the purpose of preventing her making any claims to a portion of the estate.

Ere matters had progressed to this confidence, the troupe had completed their engagement at the South and were back in New York when the April winds were blowing, and Claire, having concluded her season of singing, had begun to make arrangements to go abroad, with the thousand dollars she had left in bank, to study a year in Milan.

Elsie's week of delight in New Orleans had long since become a thing of the past; she had parted, weeping bitter, passionate tears, from Aubrey Chayce; he had gone on to Florida, and now his month there had passed, and he, too, was in New York, doing the honors of his bachelor home; while Elsie, roaming about the flowery alleys and perfumed thickets of Belle-Rivière—swinging in her hammock, chasing butterflies, poring over high-seasoned novels, and growing older and prettier every day—was living on her father's promise that he would certainly take her to New York in August—or, at least, to some Northern sea-shore resort—in fact, wherever their friend, Aubrey Chayce, might be.

Carlos Bruno had not gone South with the troupe, as he could only do so by giving up his place in the music store, where he thought it wisest to retain his place as plain Charles Brown; though the temptation to go where Claire went was nearly irresistible; he was as much in love with her as ever, and cherished a wild ambition to become something great, for her sake. How could he guess that little Claire, so poor and friendless, had such magnificent dreams?

Rex, going into the music store once with her, read the young fellow's heart as plainly as if it had been in a glass case; for a few moments he was uneasy, distressed—until he saw that Claire was too indifferent to this devotion even to be aware of it. That same day Rex made another discovery. He and Claire had gone on out to the Park to catch a breath of the spring sweetness growing there; as they sat on a bench, talking over the proposed year in Milan, Claire suddenly gave a little cry and turned as pale as death.

"What is it, my little friend?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," she was as crimson as an instant before she had been pale. He looked about him—a carriage was rolling by—a handsome, open park-wagon, and driving the spirited horses attached to it, was a young gentleman, the pink of fashion, whose golden mustache and blonde features Rex remembered to have seen before. A sudden vision of struggling in the dark with this same dashing personage rose up before him—the perfumed airs of Belle-Rivière blew about him—he turned and shot a keen glance out of those observant eyes at the flushed cheek and downcast, tremulous silken lashes of the girl by his side—and he read her heart, too, with quick intuition.

"Aha!" he said to himself, a curious smile growing about his mouth, a gleam shooting from his thoughtful eyes—"the man whom Julien Laselle has chosen for his daughter—with whom the little heiress of Belle-Rivière is infatuated! Aha! my humble little song-bird, 'lies the wind in that quarter?' This adds a more pungent spice to the dish that is cooking."

Whatever his reflections were, they put him in excellent humor. Affecting not to notice the cause of Claire's embarrassment, he laughed and jested about every trifling incident of their stroll.

"It is bitter to be poor," he said, as they found themselves, at twilight, on their way to her boarding-house, and opposite a fashionable restaurant. "Our little jaunt has given me an incredible appetite; I would like to treat you and myself to every costly luxury on the bill of fare. Well, never mind! We can have a cup of good French coffee and a plate of Vienna bread."

Taking her into the glittering place, he chose a cosy corner where they had a little table to themselves, and proceeded to astonish her by

ordering a dinner that began with ox-tail soup, and ended in strawberries at a dollar a plate, with Neapolitan ice-cream and *café noir*.

"This is a red-letter day in my calendar," he said, in reply to Claire's wide-open look of surprise, "and I'm bound to celebrate it, if it takes a month of Bright's liberal wages to do it properly. Confound economy! One can't always be counting his pennies! It makes a man mean. I had a big idea come to me out in the Park, there. Sometime, if we both live, I will tell you *why* this is a red-letter day with me. Oho, here comes our *elegante* of the park-wagon! It seems he is going to honor Delmonico with his patronage, this evening. A splendid-looking fellow, I acknowledge. Nothing effeminate about him! And he has a gripe, too, not easily shaken off. We saw him down South, at the home of our uncle, didn't we? Let me see, did you tell me his name?"

"Aubrey Chayce," murmured the girl, very low—her heart was bounding against the ruby ring which lay always on her bosom.

"Oh, Claire, Claire, what a man that uncle of yours is! Now, if only he had been a hero—a man of honor—like your father—how differently my little *protégée* would be situated!"—there was a keen irony in his tone—scarcely perceptible, like the touch of a very sharp knife that wounds the more deeply.

"I never like you when you speak in that tone, Mr. Rex."

He passed his napkin over his mouth to conceal a smile.

"It seems as if you ridiculed my father," she added, indignantly.

"Heaven forbid! If there is anything gives me exquisite pleasure it is to hear the daughter of Victor Laselle exalt that ideal image of her heroic father which she has placed on her heart's altar! If there is anything would give me exquisite pain it would be to cast a shadow over that ideal glory. Worship your hero, little Claire, in peace. Aubrey Chayce, you say?" taking out his note-book and recording the name. "I propose to return South after you sail away 'o'er the dark-blue sea' to the city of the glorious cathedral, and I may meet this Mr. Chayce again. I am out of employment now, until Bright sets up another company, and I may as well be down South as anywhere."

"And if you ever meet my—Miss Laselle and—and Mr. Chayce, will you write to me about it, Rex?"

"Ay, that I will! All that I know and plenty more that I imagine."

She smiled faintly, shaking her pretty head.

"You are too much of a tease, Rex."

"Confound him! he has spoiled her appetite," thought the observant Rex, "she ate her soup with a relish, and now she is only trifling with her salmon. My money will be thrown away! Poor foolish little thing! What chance has she against the heiress of Belle-Rivière? Poor foolish little girl, with her lofty love and aspiration! Would not Julien Laselle squirm could he hear her talk of her soldier-father? Poor, poor little enthusiast, dreaming of things that never were 'in earth or heaven,' you have gained one friend who will be true as steel. When you are ready to fight this haughty uncle of yours, little Claire, your faithful Sancho Panza will be at your service. It is better to let her go abroad for a time. This magnificent voice of hers will be none the worse for a year's severe study. We shall be in correspondence; and I would like a few months of preparation," his own plate of fish had grown cold while his thoughts rambled on, and he motioned the waiter to remove it, whispering afterward gaily to Claire: "What! shall we have no sauce of appetite to our ten-dollar dinner?" and she, coloring with guilt, strove to forget that she was sitting not four yards away from Aubrey Chayce, and to remember that poor, economical Rex was giving her a treat.

He never saw her at all; if he had glanced that way and recognized the sweet chorus-singer he would have given her but a passing thought, as one who had annoyed his friend Laselle but whose spirit he had admired; not the faintest shadow of a suspicion had visited his mind that in her he might find the Gipsy girl of the oleanders, who wore his ring, and whom, he had a romantic presentiment, he should meet *some time, somewhere*, and learn to like, perhaps to love! That was a delightful possibility which sometimes made the half-spoiled pet of society smile softly to himself at thought of.

"What delicious strawberries!" said little Claire, "and how extravagant of us to be eating them, Rex," and as she said it, with a low laugh, she was dreadfully, deathly conscious

that Aubrey Chayce had left his place where he sat—was going out—was on the steps—that she had stolen her last look after him for many a weary month and day; and Rex heard the faltering thrill in her playful tones and saw her color waver and knew what the poor little heart was suffering.

Yet it was fated that Claire should yet have another glimpse of that beautiful face before it passed out of her life; there was a stir about the door of the restaurant—a tumult of people gathering about some central object of interest—the doors were swung wide open and three or four gentlemen appeared bearing between a burden which they laid down upon the floor, and Claire, starting to her feet with a great shudder of horror, saw that the burden was the motionless figure of Aubrey Chayce.

Running lightly down the steps of the building he had slipped on a bit of banana-skin which some criminally-careless person had cast upon the walk—had fallen backward and struck his head against the sharp edge of the lower step—and had been picked up insensible. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the young man to whom this life was so full of pleasure and expectation and triumph, lay helpless at death's very door. The blow had been a fearful one; he might sink and die without ever coming out of this comatose state; or, brain-fever might set in: this was what a physician, who had been dining at a table near by, and who came to his aid immediately, remarked to those gathered about.

"Better take him home at once; I will go with him and remain until his family doctor can be sent for."

It was Rex who called a carriage, who sat on the box with the driver while the injured man and the physician were driven to Chayce's house—Rex who aided in bearing the sufferer up-stairs to his room, and who offered himself, an hour later, as nurse, to remain by the wounded man so long as his services were needed.

"I have had plenty of experience," he said to the doctors, "I refer you to Mr. Bright for my character—I am out of a place just now, and would like this work."

They had noticed his coolness and efficiency and approved of him.

CHAPTER XI.

SUSPECTED DANGER.

Thrilled me, filled me with fantastic
Terrors, never felt before. —POE.

THAT night was one of sad watching for several of Aubrey's friends; the news of the accident flew about the clubs and before ten o'clock half a dozen devoted comrades were by his bedside where, with two physicians, they remained until long after dawn. There was not much to do except to look at him. The doctors counted his pulse every little while, to find if it had quite gone out. Nobody interfered with Rex; he did what errands there were to do; the remainder of the time he sat at the foot of the bed.

"How beautiful he is!" thought the self-appointed nurse; "what a fine head, what perfect features! No wonder my poor little girl loves him! Silly child, silly, silly child! If he were a marrying man he would have married long ago—he must be twenty-six or seven. Poor fellow, I'm afraid the 'golden bowl is broken at the fountain—the sweet draught of life slipped from his taste forever!' So still, so pale—is not this already death?"

One of the doctors went away before the red, slow dawn had grown into actual day; as he softly opened the door and stepped out he saw a slight figure crouching on the upper step; a pale, pale little wistful face was lifted.

"Is he alive? Oh, sir, tell me!"

"He is alive—that is all. No change has taken place."

"Will he die?"—the smothered words burst out like a cry.

"We cannot answer that question yet,"—the doctor looked with severe scrutiny at the young girl, shivering in the damp and dimness of the early morning; so pretty, so plainly dressed, what brought her here to crouch on these steps of brown-stone, guarded by their kingly carved lions? "I suppose Chayce is like other rich young fellows," he thought, "flirts with lots of girls below him in station. This one seems to take his peril quite too seriously to heart. My dear," he added, aloud, "you will be ill if you stay out in this fog; let me advise you to run home. The gentleman is no relative of yours, I take it," with a smile.

Little Claire shrunk from that smile, she hardly knew why.

"I have only been here half an hour, sir," she said, looking at him with heavy, miserable eyes. "I could not sleep and so, when it began to be light, I came. He is nothing to me, sir—nothing, nothing in the world!—only, I saw him hurt last evening, and I felt anxious to know how he was."

"Well, my dear, he may come out of this not much the worse for the accident, or he may sink and die without ever so much as lifting an eyelash."

He ran down the steps and walked rapidly away. He saw men die every week of his life—what was it to him? Slowly, with dragging movements, little Claire got up and went to her boarding-house, where the girl was scrubbing away at the "front."

"For the land's sake, miss, where have you been so early?"

"To see a sick friend."

"Faith, and ye look sick yerself, miss."

"I have not slept," answered Claire, and she crept on up to her room, where she flung herself down on her little lounge-bed, with something clasped tight in her hot hands, and prayed, as she had never prayed before, that Aubrey Chayce might live. After that, a little comforted, with the ring he had given her pressed to her lips, she sunk into a fitful slumber, full of broken, terrifying dreams.

Rex did not forget that his little *protégée* must be in painful anxiety; but there were no tidings to send.

About eight o'clock the gentlemen who had spent the night in watching were called down to breakfast, leaving him alone with the patient. These friends were still lingering over their coffee and chocolate, when the hurried ringing of a bell called them up-stairs. Aubrey had opened his eyes and was looking about with dull curiosity.

Instantly the physician who remained signed to them all to go out, and bending over his patient explained to him that he had fallen and hurt his head, and must remain quiet.

"You had a fearful blow, no mistake, my boy; but two or three days of absolute rest will bring you out all right; only you must obey orders, which are, not to talk, see your friends, read or think—more than you can help—and take your medicine as prescribed, with a light diet."

"You don't think I will be an idiot for life, then?" asked Aubrey, with a faint attempt at a smile.

"You will, if you exercise your brain on smart things, just now. Mr. Rex, I want you to see that my orders are exactly and implicitly obeyed."

"They shall be, doctor."

At the sound of that low, searching, decided voice, Aubrey slightly turned his head to look at his nurse, but said nothing; in a moment his eyes closed again.

The doctor took Rex out into the hall.

"There may be brain-fever before night," he said.

"I am afraid of it."

"You feel yourself to be a competent nurse?"

"Try me; if I fail in anything, get some one else."

"You seem steady—not at all nervous, Mr. Rex."

"I think I am master of myself, doctor." He added, with a cool smile—"May I hope you are quite competent?"

The physician colored and laughed.

"If I need advice I have plenty of confreres," he answered.

After that, for fourteen days, Rex had a hard time of it. Brain-fever did set in, and as Aubrey was an athlete in size and strength, many was the fierce struggle his nurse had with him—reminding him of that tussle in the perfumed garden of Belle-Rivière, only these were far more serious. One has to be on his guard who wrestles with a madman.

Little Claire grew thin and white during those two weeks. Many hours in the twenty-four did she spend on her knees before the image of the Virgin. She went on with her sewing in preparation for her year abroad, but her heart no longer bounded with glowing dreams of what she was going to accomplish.

Why did Claire love Aubrey Chayce with this life-deep love? A man could have understood such a love—a love that asked nothing, hoped for nothing—that was pure, perfect devotion. She drooped, like an untended flower, because he was ill, in danger. He would never know she had paled and drooped for him—had prayed for his life. Some time, if he got well, he would marry that happy Elsie whose life was so different from her own—so brilliant, so

guarded by love and fondness—so flattered, so fortunate that it took all possible success for granted; he would marry her proud cousin, but she prayed for him with none the less fervor. All she asked was that *he* might be well and happy; for him the feast, for her the crumbs.

The fourteen terrible days came to an end, as all days will; the fifteenth day had begun; the hands of the noiseless clock in the sick-chamber pointed to two; the streets outside were very quiet; straw had been laid down; at that hour in the morning no wagons broke the stillness; a gentle, warm spring rain was falling, falling through the darkness. Rex, who had resolutely refused to give up the night watch to any other, sat in a large easy-chair very near the bed, anxiously watching his patient, whose incessant tossings had at last ceased and who now lay softly sleeping. Rex could see the dew on his brow, but he dared not touch his pulse for fear of awakening him; suddenly, while he leaned and listened to the regular breathing, the sunken eyes unclosed and looked quietly into his own for a full minute; then the lips whispered something which he had to bend to make out:

"I say, Rex Diable, you and I came to close quarters once, under those oleanders. What are you doing here? What am I doing? Is this Belle-Rivière? Surely, I smell jasmine-flowers."

"Yes, because I bought a pot of them to-day and put in your window. We are not at Belle-Rivière, but in your own house; and you must not talk—but take this spoonful of brandy-and-cream and go to sleep again."

Rex had a sort of authority about him which insured obedience; his patient took the spoonful of liquid put to his lips, his eyes gradually closed under the calm, magnetic gaze of his nurse, nor did he open them again until long after daylight; by that time his pulse had sensibly increased in strength, and the doctor, who came early, declared that he was not afraid to pronounce the case out of danger—with due caution in getting well."

By nine o'clock Rex himself had conveyed the intelligence to little Claire; running over to her boarding-place just long enough to pat her pale cheek with friendly hand, and tell her to get back her roses:

"And now you will sail on Saturday, I suppose. Your poor old Rex will be a lonesome fellow when you are away."

"You are coming to see me before the year is up, are you not, Rex?—I have been hoping you would promise."

"I will come, any day, if you need me, little friend. If you are sick, or in trouble, just cable the news to me, and I will be there as soon as a Cunard steamer will take me. You must write to me once a week, and I, for my part, will keep you posted on matters in America."

On the following Saturday little Claire sailed away to the land of song of which she had dreamed since she was a little girl. A few of her girl friends of the chorus were on the wharf to see her off; Carlos Bruno brought her an immense bouquet, and wiped his eyes when they got too full of salt water for him to see; Rex came down, with good news of his patient's progress; a lady of high-standing in New York, who was going abroad, not for the first time, promised protection and assistance to the forlorn little singer; the day was a sweet May day with a sky as blue as any Italy could boast—altogether, little Claire went off under as favorable auspices as she could expect.

As the fluttering handkerchiefs of her friends became invisible, as the city faded out, and the forts were passed, and the ocean began to swell under the pulsing vessel, little Claire buried her face in her large bouquet to hide the few tears which would drop in spite of her bravery.

When she looked up again, a colored servant was bringing to the lady, who had offered her protection, a couple of shawls, for the sun was sinking toward setting and the breeze was chilly.

"Will the young lady have one?" asked the servant, and, as he asked it, he lightly laid a wrap over her shoulders.

The voice made Claire start and look quickly up—she had heard it twice or thrice before, and she recognized it.

Yes, there stood Pierre, the life-long body-servant of her uncle Laselle! Not a muscle of his face moved, as he met her wondering look, but something gleamed in his silent eyes—something subtle and cunning, which struck, like a chill, to her breast, and filled her with a growing, stealthy terror.

Why had he left his master to take service

with a stranger? She knew that master and man would not have been parted, except temporarily and at the master's desire.

Had Julien Laselle set Pierre as a spy upon her ways? It looked like it. Yet, what was there to spy in her quiet life?—was it not more like a menace? Was not this mulatto—who once before had done his master's dishonest bidding by overpowering and robbing her—capable of carrying out her uncle's directions to a still more heinous extent? Might he not even murder her in some lone street of some strange, foreign city? She knew now, what she had not known when she met her uncle at their first interview, that an immense estate had come to him by bequest, to which she, in all human probability, was co-heir, and that had been his reason for robbing her of the proofs of her father's marriage.

Would not a man who had done that, do worse?

Very helpless, and fear-haunted, and terrified did little Claire secretly feel, as she turned away from the mulatto's subtle gaze. Already her life abroad had become a dread to her.

CHAPTER XII.

A PHANTOM FEAR AND PHANTOM FOE.

For I have ceased
To justify my deeds unto myself—
The last infirmity of evil.

—BYRON.

Why doth he gaze on thee, and thou on him?

—IBID.

"Oh, papa, do you really, really mean it? And are we really, really to go with you?"—Elfie's round arms were about her father's neck and she was smothering him with kisses between her cries of rapture. It was scarcely the first of June—she had not expected to be taken North before the middle of July, yet he had just bidden her prepare to start in three days.

"Yes, darling, we will go for three months at some bracing seaside resort, this time. Your mamma needs it; and I need it. I am not feeling as well as usual."

Elfie turned her beautiful eyes scrutinizingly on his face.

"It is true; you are not well, papa! You look thin and worn. What will we do when traveling about without Pierre? It is so strange you should have allowed him to leave you—when you were not feeling well, too! Pierre is a nasty, hateful, ungrateful thing! I wish I could have him well whipped!"

"Hush, Elfie, you don't know what you are talking about! Pierre is like the rest of the world—he likes change. Doubtless he will soon tire of service under a Northern mistress and return to me. The lady was going abroad—he thought it would be a fine thing to travel in Europe."

"But, you will not think of taking him back!" cried the girl, indignantly.

"At least, I will wait until I have the opportunity," her father answered, with a constrained smile. "Run away now, Elfie, and tell Phyllis about getting mamma's and your own things packed. I would like to get off on the second."

"Poor papa! I'm so sorry you are not well! And I'm perfectly wild with delight to think we are going so soon! Three months! Oh, joy, joy! And—papa—we will go to the same place—as Mr. Chayce, shall we not? You said he was going to the seaside as soon as he was strong enough to be moved—that his physicians had ordered it—so, why cannot we all stop together at some hotel? It will make such a pleasant party."

"I dare say we shall do that very thing, Elfie. Would it suit you? It seems to me you have taken an alarming fancy to Mr. Chayce!"

"He is quite the most splendid gentleman I have ever met—always excepting present company! I am desperately fond of him, papa. If he don't fall in love with me and propose to me when I get to be a year or two older I shall kill myself in sheer despair," laughing and tossing back the blue-black masses of her rippling hair.

"However, papa, so far as that is concerned, we are already affianced, after a fashion. Didn't you notice his calling me his 'fairy fiancée' when he said good-by?"

"Is that so?" asked Julien Laselle, patting the velvety cheek of his daughter; "well, I shall not prove one of those cruel parents who raise wicked objections. Now run and tell Phyllis what she has to do. I will speak to your mother."

It was a burning-hot day even on the vine-shaded gallery. Belle-Rivière lay drooping under the fierce sunshine; while its master did look pale and languid—quite ill enough to justify

his rather hasty decision of going North immediately. The season was very hot; and it might be that he had fretted a good deal over the danger to his distant friend, Aubrey Chayce, while that young gentleman—whom he fully intended for his future son-in-law—lay struggling with the wild phantasies of brain-fever. Then, too, he missed his faithful body-servant, Pierre. He had attendants enough and to spare, but Pierre had been more to him than a hireling—he had been his friend and confidant—and there were moments when he repented of sending him away on the peculiar errand on which he had gone.

As he paced languidly along the gallery, after Elfie left him, he struck his hot forehead with his hand, muttering:

"Not one hour's sleep last night! This will not do! It is not yet too late to recall Pierre; a dispatch would reach him in a few hours. It is not so easy to be a scoundrel as one might think. The part does not agree with me. If I could—if I dared—I would let the whole matter drop. I thought I could make her believe anything—that she would quietly accept my statement of her position. It is her spirit that renders more desperate measures necessary. And then—oh, ghosts and devils! I will not try to account for the impression that man made on me, for 'that way madness lies.' Well, well," with a heavy sigh, "it is too late to draw back. If I would not do what I purpose for myself—I would do it for my daughter—my darling!—my proud, beautiful darling! What is that miserable offspring of a woman of the stage to me, that I should allow her to come between my Elfie and her bright prospects? Nothing, nothing. I will not hesitate—I will not even brood over it. I am going North for a summer's pleasure—and I mean to have it. We will go on to New York and stop a few days at the Fifth Avenue. If Chayce is already off to the seaside, we will follow. If he has not made his choice we will wait until he does."

The Laselles, with their two servants, Phyllis and young Jeff—the latter having taken Pierre's place as valet—arrived in New York within ten days after this. They ascertained that Aubrey Chayce had shut up his house and gone to Newport; it was very early to seek the seaside, but his doctors had ordered sea air as the tonic best calculated to tone up the somewhat shattered system of their wealthy patient. The ladies required a few days in the metropolis for shopping and dressmaking; and then the Laselles followed on to Newport and took rooms for the season in the same hotel with their friend.

On the afternoon of their arrival Madame Laselle and her daughter went to their rooms to dress, and while Jeff labored to get his master's things ready for him, that master sought out his friend. He found Aubrey sitting in a rocking-chair on the broad piazza of the Ocean House, on the side where the salt sea breeze was blowing, looking thin and somewhat worn, and with his golden locks cropped extremely close—having grown very little since his poor head was shaved and laid in ice—but with the glow of returning health visible in cheeks and lips.

Laselle's hands and voice both trembled as he greeted him; there was no doubt but that he was truly fond of the young New Yorker.

"You have been very ill, Aubrey," he said, holding the white hands in his own with an affectionate clasp.

"Yes, indeed. My unlucky slip came near being a fatal one. I dare say I owe my life to the patience and skill of my nurse—no common fellow, but one who helped in field hospitals during the war—a very intelligent man for one in his position. He seemed to take a fancy to me, and to determine that I should live. We used to have glorious trials of strength when I was off my head; when the fever left me I was weak as an infant—it was a question whether I would rally or not; he would not let me sink."

"I am sure we are all under the deepest obligations to him. I should never have cared to see the North again, if you had died, my friend."

"Thanks. And now tell me all about the ladies. You see, I am an invalid yet, for here comes my good nurse with the inevitable egg-nogg or beef-tea."

Laselle had drawn a chair to his friend's side. He looked up at the nurse he had just heard so highly praised as he approached and presented to his patient a milk punch or something of that sort—looked up, with some interest—and sprung suddenly to his feet, his eyes dilating, his lower jaw dropping, his face whitening. Aubrey stared in surprise. Then a memory of that scene in the library at Belle Rivière came vividly over him; a cloud of regret passed over

his face; he took the goblet from the salver and motioned the man to retire, who immediately obeyed.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Laselle," Aubrey began, in accents of remorse. "It has just occurred to me that you seem to have a dislike to Rex. I did not remember that you had met before, until I saw your agitation. I am very sorry."

Laselle wiped the sweat from his forehead. "It is nothing, nothing at all," he murmured. "I will explain it. You know my brother was killed on the battle-field. He was a colonel, young as he was; and a sergeant of about his own age was appointed to be his servant and body-guard. This person reminds me of that sergeant, strangely. I could swear it was the same fellow, grown older, were I not morally certain that he, too, died—killed by the same shot which fatally wounded Col. Laselle. You can understand why the sight of him agitated me so terribly in the library that night—why the sight of him, again, so unexpectedly, renewed my agitation. Victor's death was a severe blow. Anything recalling it so vividly must be painful."

"I am dreadfully sorry," said Aubrey. "It is quite too bad. What can we do about it? Why not question Rex and ascertain definitely if he be the same man? It might be a comfort to you to talk with him about your brother, after the first shock was over."

"A comfort!" Julien Laselle cried, in accents of horror. Then, making an effort to control himself, he added, quietly, "You are right. It would be a comfort, of course. I will have a talk with this man—some day, soon—when we can be alone together—to-morrow, perhaps. Yes, yes, I will speak to him, of course, of course."

Mr. Laselle continued pale and agitated; he had daily been growing nervous and the unexpected sight of Chayce's nurse had evidently given him a severe shock. Aubrey talked on cheerfully, trying to divert his mind from its trouble; and after a time Phyllis appeared to say to her master that the ladies were in the parlor; both gentlemen went in to devote themselves for a time to Madame Laselle and her daughter. As soon as possible Mr. Laselle excused himself—leaving his wife comfortably ensconced on a sofa, and Elsie, in the seventh heaven of happiness, pacing slowly up and down the long room on Aubrey Chayce's arm—and went to his room, ostensibly to change his dress.

When he reached it, however, he sent Jeff out of it, locked the door and stood by a window, moodily staring out at the distant bay.

"If I could get up the courage to speak to him—to accuse him of it!—but I can't! The glance of his eye chills me to the marrow-bones. Why should I feel this terror? Why should I not hope that what I suspect might prove the truth? He would not be hard on me; if I asked forgiveness I should receive it. Ah, should I? Not after *that*!—anything might be forgiven but that! Would to God Pierre were here—this hour—and I had a conscience free from stain! Then, indeed, I might go to this man and demand to know the truth."

CHAPTER XIII.

A CRY FROM OVER THE SEA.

By a power to thee unknown,
Thou canst never be alone.—BYRON.

"DANGER—danger—danger to little Claire!" Rex was walking up and down Mr. Chayce's private parlor. The evening mail had been delivered a few moments before; he held an open letter in his hand; his air was that of one half-distracted.

"Danger to that child! Terrible danger! And the wide ocean between us! Oh, that I had wings—that I could annihilate space! If anything happens after I shall curse myself for allowing her to go alone. Did I not know that she was in peril? Nay, hardly could I think that Julien Laselle would go so far on the wrong road as that! I gave him credit for being human—though tempted. Perhaps I am needlessly alarmed. Perhaps *she* is, poor little thing."

It was after dark; Aubrey Chayce came up from tea to get his letters; he entered the parlor as Rex was striding about.

"Mr. Chayce, I must leave you to-night."

"That is strange," said Aubrey, immediately connecting this resolution with Mr. Laselle, and thinking there certainly was a mystery between these two men. "And not altogether kind, Rex."

"I know it. No one could be sorrier to leave

you so abruptly than I am. Nothing but the danger of one far more helpless than you are could induce me to do it. It is a case of desperate necessity, or I should not think of it."

"Well, I am sorry; for I have taken a great fancy to you, and I owe you a large debt of gratitude. However, I confess, I am not very ill at present; and if some one who is in worse case needs your skill and care, I ought not to be selfish."

Rex saw that he thought he was going to another patient, but he did not explain himself.

"I must go by the night train to New York, Mr. Chayce."

"What, to-night?"

"Yes. The case admits of no delay," glancing at the letter in his hand. "You have your servant with you—I am only a superfluity now; you do not need me."

"Perhaps not; but I want you. Let me see, I owe you something more tangible than a debt of gratitude; I have paid you no money for your hard work—those tussles we used to have together!—those ought to be well paid for."

A flush came into Rex's face; for a moment he looked embarrassed; but, with a light laugh, he finally said:

"As you please, Mr. Chayce. It was a labor of love; but I will not refuse your money. Only, keep strictly to the usual wages in such service, please."

Aubrey thrust into his hand a roll of bills, saying:

"Do not count them; I have not. It is none too much, whatever it is. And now, when and where shall I see you again, Rex? I look on you as a friend—a personal friend—whom I shall be unsatisfied to give up."

"I shall see you on your return to the city in the fall; possibly sooner, but hardly. And now, good-by, and take care of yourself, Mr. Chayce; I have but half an hour in which to pack my bag and reach the depôt. Be very, very careful of yourself for some weeks yet."

"Shall I not have an occasional note from you, Rex?"

"Perhaps—why not?"

"Well, good-by, then, till we meet again."

"I did not dare confide my destination to him; he and Laselle are friends; Laselle will be curious to know where I am gone; he must not know. In these days of telegrams I prefer that he should not suspect what journey I am about to take. I hope I shall get out of this hotel without meeting him. If I were to come face to face with him I fear I could not control myself; I should shake his soul out of his body; yet I do not wish to forget who he is, nor what he is to me. It is better to avoid him."

Thus Rex muttered as he crammed his things into a traveling-bag, and ran down to catch the stage which was going to the train.

It was not until seated in the cars, under the smoky rays of a lamp over his head, with the train rushing southward, that he took time to read again the letter which had startled him so—little Claire's first letter since reaching Milan.

"DEAR REX: I am here, and as nicely fixed as I dared to expect. Mrs. Dudley did not leave me until she had secured me a nice apartment in the same house with three other young ladies, who have come to this city for the same purpose as I have—to study singing. We are very comfortable; have one maid for the four of us, who keeps our rooms, brings our breakfast, orders our dinner, and so forth. * * *

"Dear friend, when I wrote you from Paris, I did not mention one thing which was uppermost in my mind. I ought to have told you, then; but I dreaded to cause you uneasiness. I have told you how favorable to my progress everything is—everything *but one*. Rex, I confess to you, I am miserable!—haunted by a fear whose very vagueness and want of substance makes it all the more horrible to me. I wonder if you will share it—or if you will laugh at me! Do you remember Pierre, Mr. Laselle's confidential servant? Are you aware that he took service with Mrs. Dudley and crossed the ocean in the same ship with me? Why did he do that? Why did my uncle part with him? When I recognized him, within an hour after the steamer left her dock, a deadly chill struck to my very heart. There was a gleam of malice and triumph in his eyes which I could not mistake."

"You ask, if this is of importance to me. Perhaps not; yet, oh, Rex, I am afraid of him. I cannot explain to you *why*—only that I am. He is here in Milan. What is he staying here for? I had a note from Mrs. Dudley, from Florence, yesterday; in it she remarked that Pierre had played her a very mean trick—that he had never appeared at all, after they left Milan, although she had supposed him to be on the train. Yesterday, quite late in the day, on our way home from our lesson, Miss Everett and myself went into one of the great churches here: I knelt to say my prayers: you know how dim it is in these old cathedrals—there was a glorious sunset outside; yet, in there, we almost had to grope our way. As I arose from my knees I saw some one skulking behind a pillar, not three feet from me. He disappeared behind it instantly, but not until I

had recognized him—it was Pierre! I cannot tell you how I felt—I nearly fainted. How easy for him to have thrust one of these small Italian stilettoes into my shoulder as I knelt. No one would ever have known who had assassinated me."

"I shall be very careful. I never go out alone; and now, even in church, I shall try to be on my guard. Yet, I feel so *helpless*, Rex; as if the meshes of one who hates me were closing around me. I do dislike to trouble your kind heart; but I must confide this to some one, or go insane. The very sunshine of Milan is full of horror to me! Am I a foolish, nervous girl?"

This was the portion of the letter Rex had received which had caused him to desert Aubrey Chayce, to fly to New York in order to be in that city in time to take the French steamer which quitted that port next morning at nine.

"Alas, I fear her terror is too well-grounded. Poor, poor little Claire! Why did I let her go? Why did I take time to discomfit Julien Laselle in my own way, at my own leisure? Would to Heaven I had denounced him two months ago—yes, that night at Belle-Rivière, when a guilty conscience felled him to the floor. Then and there, before all those people, I should have spoken. Yet I had compassion on him because—he was Victor's brother. One should never spare a poisonous snake! Put your heel on it where you find it. Poor little Claire! there is no sleep for me until I reach you."

Julien Laselle learning, the next day, that Chayce's nurse had gone to New York to take charge of another patient, breathed a sigh of relief. The ruin which had glared so near receded again into the dim distance.

"Elsie, my darling," he cried, in a sudden burst of joyous spirits, "we will have a glorious summer of it here by the sea!"

And Elsie, laughing back at him, while a blush showed through the rich brown of her velvety cheek, answered:

"Yes, papa, a glorious summer! I know I shall be happier than I ever in my life have been."

Yet Elsie's experience in the following weeks was far from being as happy as she glowingly anticipated.

Aubrey Chayce was very kind to her—he gave her bon-bons oftener than flowers—he laughed with her—teased her—pulled her long blue-black curls—treated her, in short, in Miss Elsie's opinion, far too much as if she were a little girl.

Aubrey would have been confounded could he have suspected the fierce, womanly jealousy with which this precocious southern child watched his dealings with other ladies. He had a large circle of acquaintance among the *élite* of the villa-owners in that aristocratic seaside resort—was a prime favorite with lovely belles and cultured women—was out incessantly to dinners—took regal beauties sailing in his yacht—was invited to a seat in fashionable carriages for the daily promenade on Bellevue avenue—poor Elsie sometimes scarcely saw him for days, and her heart burned with consuming rage and pride, her gay spirits were clouded by disappointment.

"Aubrey Chayce," she said to him, one day, when, after paying her no attention for a week, he brought her a box of confections, "I don't want bon-bons! I'm not a little girl! You insult me, the way you treat me! I more than half believe you don't intend to keep your word to me, after all!" and hot tears flashed in her black eyes.

"My word?" queried Aubrey, perplexed, thinking he must have asked her to drive and forgotten it—then, seeing her expression, he blushed, laughed, and turned the subject, thinking to himself, "What a ridiculous child!"

CHAPTER XIV.

OVER THE PARAPET.

Oh, Milan, oh the chanting quires,
The giant windows' blazoned fires,
The light, the space, the gloom, the glory!
A mount of marble, a hundred spires!
—TENNYSON.

GLORIOUS! The sight was one to be remembered for a lifetime!

Little Claire, with two other of the three girl-students, and their elderly maid for duenna, had chosen a cloudless afternoon of the summer to do something they had for weeks been wishing to do—ascend to the roof and tower of the great Cathedral.

Since that adventure in church of which Claire had written to Rex, she had scarcely dared set foot in one of those "dim religious" haunts—only with extremest caution did she venture anywhere where she would be, even for a few moments, alone. Yet, since the writing of that letter, not one glimpse even of the

shadow of Pierre had she ever seen; as the weeks stole by she began to feel that she had been only a nervous, foolish child about the colored man. Doubtless he was far enough away from Milan before this; it had been a mere chance his being on the same steamer with her.

"My presentiment, after all, was only a reflection of my own mood," she said to herself, as she set forth, in excellent spirits, on this little expedition. "I am so sorry I alarmed dear old Rex!—I only hope he will laugh at my foolish letter as it deserves."

The little party had mounted to the wonderful roof with its hundreds of marble angels; but, when they would have ascended the many steps to the platform in the tower, which was the object of their visit, one of the girls was seized with vertigo, and had to sit down and shut her eyes, while her friend remained by her side, holding her hand to reassure her. Claire was a few steps in advance.

"Do not wait for us," cried the friend. "She will get over this dizziness in a few moments, and then we will follow."

So Claire toiled up and up, until at last she came out on the platform, where she stood entranced, enthralled, by the vision of earth and heaven which lay before her.

"I am almost glad that I arrived here before the others," she thought. "One enjoys such a scene as this best in absolute solitude—that is, if one cannot have just the right friend—" thinking of Aubrey Chayce. "Glorious! Wonderful!"

She stood, rapt in admiration of the scene, the city, the plains, the dream-like mountains; the burning blue Italian sky already changing in the west to sunset gold. Involuntarily came to her lips Tennyson's exquisite lines:

"I stood among the silent statues
And stunted pinnacles, mute as they.
How faintly flushed, how phantom-fair,
Was Monte Rosa, hanging there,
A thousand shadowy-penciled valleys
And snowy dells in a golden air."

Up in that magnificent eyrie, far above the haunts of men, almost even above the flight of birds, little Claire felt strangely peaceful and secure.

What harm could come to her there?

She forgot even that she was waiting for her friends to appear beside her—forgot to wonder why it was they did not make their appearance.

Then, suddenly, in the midst of the keen rapture which had thrilled every vein, the long dream of Aubrey Chayce into which she had fallen, the sense of wonderful peace and security, came a creeping change.

Have you not sometimes, in the perfumed warmth and sweetness of a summer flower-garden, felt a breath of cold air sweep down from some upper strata, chilling you as it passed?

At first, the change in Claire's sensations was as if a "wind blew out of a cloud," straight from one of those Alpine glaciers gleaming rose in the gold of the declining sun. She shivered.

This was followed by a far stranger, a more oppressive sensation.

A feeling of sudden, absolute terror seized upon the very pulses of her heart. She saw nothing—heard nothing.

She would have glanced behind her to look for her friends; but so singularly did this intense consciousness of some great horror brooding there, near to her, but as yet unseen, thrall her senses and her will, that she could not bring herself to turn her head. Her blood felt as if turning to ice in her veins; her breath came laboriously—if she looked, if she turned her head, she knew only too well what she should see!

She tried to scream—to send her voice, shrill and piercing, down those winding stairs, or down—down—down—to those toy streets mapped out below; but she could not force so much as a gasp from her stiffening lips, so did the wretched nightmare grasp at her lungs and throat.

There was some one behind her—she saw his shadow, she heard his rapid breathing—a dreadful intuition told her who it was.

Pierre, the hireling of her enemy, stood there behind her.

Before her, a frail, low parapet—and beneath—death.

She knew his purpose as well as she knew that he had stealthily followed her to that lone spot, and now, fierce, sly and determined, only awaited the few seconds necessary to concentrate his brute strength, to seize and hurl her down that awful depth.

It would be a cunning murder.

Those two were there alone, and no human being could assert that she had not been seized

with vertigo and fallen over that low railing. He was there, waiting, preparing, not dreaming that she was aware of his presence, for she had not stirred a finger; she could hear his watch ticking in his pocket; the slow seconds were, to her strained brain, like years of time. All her life passed before her in vivid panorama—a short, sad, innocent young life, strung with prayers, like pearls. Life was sweet—full of promise—oh, it was horrible, right then and there in the very bloom of it, to be hurled to cruel death down there on those pitiless stones, amid those pitiless statues!

As suddenly as it came the paralysis of terror left her; the very agony of her dread snapped it asunder, and quick as lightning she turned, threw herself at his feet, clasped his knees, turned her lily face up to his dark, devilish one:

"Don't kill me, Pierre!" she sobbed.

He scowled down at her with gleaming teeth and cruel eyes.

"What have I ever done to harm you?" she pleaded.

"W'en you hahm my mastah, an' Missa Elfie, you hahm me."

"But I never have injured them. I would have loved them, dearly, if they would have allowed."

"You would make you'self out a Laselle, ha, ha! One dat ole Louisiana fust fam'ly. You would take 'way my mastah's money an' land, you would set you'self up in my young missa's place—you, you, pooh w'ite no'thern trash, you would set you'self up for Missa Laselle, ha, ha!"

"And so, because I simply claim my rights, my aristocratic uncle would set his slave to murder me!"

"Mastah Laselle never say 'Murder her, Pierre.' No, no, he don't say zat. He only say 'Get her out my way, Pierre. She must not come back to 'sturb me an' my daughty'—he leab ze way to me. I take my own way 'bout it"—with a diabolical grin he stooped and clasped her slim waist with powerful hands; she was scarcely more than a feather in his fierce clasp.

"The minutte you scream," he hissed, "over you go. You have but one minute to live, 'cept you answer my question 'Yes.' Will you swear, by God an' his holy angels, nevah to call you'self Laselle—nevah to make any claim on ze Laselle estate in any way, shape or mannah; nevah to say we made you swear—nevah to talk or write to zat man call Rex?"

As he asked this, his grasp tightened; he lifted her from her feet, she hung limp and helpless over the parapet. Poor little Claire! She looked up at the infinite sky—she looked down at the horrible spaces beneath—and shuddered—and kept silent.

"Swear—swear!" he hissed in her ear.

Never to speak to her true friend, Rex! Never to claim her soldier-father's name! Would not that be bitterer even than this terrible death? Again those fainting, glazing eyes sought the far blue heaven with the dying smile of a martyr. The soldier's child was worthy of her parentage. She closed her eyes, her lips just moved in prayer—she was already half-unconscious—after all, she would not know what killed her; the pangs of death were over.

CHAPTER XV.

A STORY TOLD ON BOARD THE YACHT.

An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high.

—COLERIDGE.

"I WONDER what has become of Pierre!" fretted Julien Laselle, pacing the interminable piazza of the Ocean House, as he had such a habit of doing, morning, noon and night, that his friends insisted it had worn him to a shadow. Indeed, the invigorating Newport breezes, which had given Aubrey Chayce all his old strength, and made Elfie's eyes brighter than ever, had done nothing for the planter, who grew thinner and paler day by day, and had also a touch of moroseness about him quite different from the eagerness with which he used to enter into social pleasures.

"I wonder what has happened to Pierre! It is four weeks and a day since I have had a letter. I do not, cannot understand it," he muttered to himself, pacing on with drooped head. "If he were ill he could have gotten some one to write for him. I find that suspense is not good for the spirits or appetite. Were Elfie not enjoying herself so well, I should have left here long ago. The solitudes of Belle-Rivière best suit my mood, I believe. I wrote Pierre, the

day after I arrived here, peremptorily ordering him to give up the business on which I sent him abroad. Perhaps he is offended and is sulking. It is not pleasant to be in doubt—to brood over imagined danger—to stand in awe of your own shadow. I used to think I was a brave man; now I think I am the veriest coward."

He paused in his slow walk and something like a smile brightened his face as Aubrey Chayce came around a turn of the piazza with Elfie on his arm, who cried as she came near:

"Oh, papa, Mr. Chayce is going to take us out in his yacht after dinner! He says there is a splendid breeze. I think sailing is perfectly elegant!—with you," she added, in a lower voice, looking up with glowing eyes in the face of her escort.

"What a persistent little flatterer you are, Miss Elfie," he answered her, lightly. "There are better sailors than I, plenty of them, around Newport Bay."

"That may be, but I like my own sailer best."

"You seem to think you have a mortgage on Mr. Chayce," laughed her father. "If Aubrey took note of all your pretty speeches he would be made very vain; but, he considers them only as the privileged outbreak of an *enfant terrible*."

"Papa, why do you say that?" retorted the girl, indignantly. "I don't believe Mr. Chayce regards me as so very childish."

"If I do, Miss Elfie, it is a fault which will mend."

"Of course it will! Papa forgets that I am going on sixteen," with a triumphant air and a flashing glance at the younger gentleman. It never occurred to Elfie, or even to her father, that this outspoken preference of hers might be embarrassing to its object—the Laselle pride firmly considered that any one honored by its patronage must be more than satisfied. "I intend to have a lovely time! Mr. Chayce says, if the breeze keeps up we will remain out until midnight; there will be a moon, and we will have a little supper on deck, and everything is to be just perfect, isn't it? You and mamma are to come along, papa—just ourselves, you see—won't it be charming? There's the summons to dinner now; I'm sure I have lost my appetite I am so eager to be off!"

Indeed, there was not a moment's quiet with Miss Elfie until they left the hotel, she jauntily attired in a dark-blue sailor-suit, with hat to match, an anchor stamped on its blue ribbon. Madame Laselle had declined the sail, as the water made her ill; only Elfie and the two gentlemen went aboard, where five sailors were ready to set the trim vessel flying over the blue sparkling bay. Never was there a more satisfactory afternoon for sailing. The yacht cut through the water with a swift motion that in itself was rapture; there was just breeze enough for excitement; Elfie, wrapped in a cloak—for the cool air was almost too strong for the Southern blossom—sat curled up on the white floor of the deck, intensely happy—for she had Aubrey Chayce all to herself for once—no full-grown ladies to bear away her prize!

"I wish we could sail on and on like this, forever," she sighed.

"We should soon have to put into port for provisions," laughed the owner of the vessel. "By the way, the man is near setting; I noticed you scarcely tasted your dinner; perhaps we had better have our cold collation now. We don't care about smothering in the cabin, neat as it is—suppose we have our refreshments on deck! How would you like that, Laselle?"

"It would be what the men call jolly."

"Then we will have it so. John, give us what you have in the hamper here on deck."

The lobster-salad, the tongue-sandwiches, the cold chicken, the champagne, the peaches, borrowed an extra flavor from the crisp salt air.

"I feel more like myself than I have for a month," declared Julien Laselle, as, leaning on his elbow, he looked off admiringly at the sunset, and smoked his cigar, while John was clearing away the *débris* of the feast.

The breeze was falling a little, as might be expected at that hour; the helmsman in response to Chayce's order had brought the vessel round on the homeward track; a great, golden moon was coming up opposite the rosy sun; Elfie caroled a sailor's song at the top of her blithe young voice.

"I shall not soon forget this hour," repeated Laselle, contentedly.

Even as he said it his eyes fell on a head uprising from the gangway, and a pair of eyes which met and fixed his own.

His countenance grew so suddenly livid that Aubrey, who noticed it, followed his startled gaze.

"Why, Rex, old fellow, is that you?" he cried, springing to his feet and shaking hands with the person who had emerged from below.

"It is I, Mr. Chayce. I beg a thousand pardons for the liberty I took in coming on board your yacht uninvited. I wanted to see you and this gentleman alone, and I thought we would avoid interruption, if we met out here on the water."

"All right, I am sure," said Aubrey, cheerfully, while the planter turned from pale to red and spoke not a word. "However, if there is anything the least unpleasant in anticipation, let me remind you, Rex, that we have a lady with us."

"Unpleasant!" echoed the intruder, with a short, strange laugh. "Not at all—not at all! Mr. Laselle must admit that it is eminently proper his daughter should hear the amusing adventures of another young lady not much older than herself. Thanks, you remember I don't smoke," as Aubrey offered him a cigar. "I will just seat myself here, with your permission," drawing a deck-stool so as to face the Southern gentleman. "I have been abroad since I saw you last, Mr. Chayce."

"Indeed? You must have made a flying visit."

"Yes, I went on urgent business which took me directly to Milan."

If his life had depended on it Julien Laselle could not have avoided the start he gave at the mention of that particular Italian city.

"I went to see a young opera-singer in whom I took a deep interest. Knowing her true history, and that she was without one friend in this wide world, I resolved to become her friend. The man who, by ties of blood, should have been her protector, was her deadly enemy—she was his own niece: to her, as her father's heir, shortly after that father's death, was left a vast inheritance by a rich Cuban uncle; this man, himself impoverished, knowing his brother's marriage to have been kept a secret, the mother dead, the heir a mere infant, resolved to seize upon the legacy for his own use and advantage. The little girl was sent to a convent; the proud planter, her uncle, lorded it over a whole parish on the strength of her money. He never expected her to learn the secret of her birth or the fact that she was the lawful heir to a magnificent estate."

"Stay," exclaimed Chayce, lifting his hand, an expression of pain and embarrassment on his features, "I think I know the parties to whom you refer; and you must confess, Rex, that it is unpleasant for me, a friend of Mr. Laselle's, to listen to this story. Let me beg of you to finish your communication in private."

"I came on board this vessel, Mr. Chayce, in order to force you, if possible, to listen to what I have to say; because you have been told that there never was a marriage and that the girl had not the shadow of a legal claim to the property which he usurped. I knew there was a marriage, for I was a witness to the ceremony. Think you the robber did not believe in the legitimacy of that marriage, when he sent his valet—a cunning mulatto scoundrel—to that girl's room, to overpower her with chloroform, and take from her her parents' letters, her father's picture, and the marriage certificate?"

The voice of the speaker was scarcely raised above a whisper—for there were sailors not very far away—but it cut clear and sharp as a knife as he put that question to the young yachtman, who looked in deep surprise at his visitor to hear him repel this outrageous implication.

Laselle did not meet the accuser's eye; he only looked at Chayce with a poor semblance of indignation, as he asked:

"Who is this fellow, Aubrey, who comes to you with these base, absurd, ridiculous allegations? Do you know anything about him? No; but I can tell you who he is!—an agent, hired by this shrewd young adventuress, to advance claims too utterly preposterous for me to notice."

"This is a painful scene to me, gentlemen; and must be doubly so to this young lady. For her sake, Rex, I beg your silence; and I must add, I consider it in very poor taste for you to have dragged me, or Miss Laselle, into hearing this controversy."

"The taste certainly is questionable," said Rex, with a dry laugh. "Sometimes there are matters of such grave importance one cannot stop to inquire whether any one's taste will be offended by the mention of them. 'Who is this fellow?' asks Julien Laselle. I wish he would look me straight in the eyes and tell you who I am."

"Ay, who are you? I wish to Heaven I were certain who you are!" cried the planter, and all could see that he trembled from head to foot.

Elfie crept closer to her father, twining her soft arm about his neck.

"Dear papa, why do you allow that low, vulgar wretch to discompose you? Who is it he is talking about? Why do you care? Mr. Chayce, why don't you order your sailors to pick up this rude person and throw him overboard?"

Aubrey could not restrain a slight smile at the cavalier manner in which the haughty young beauty would have disposed of his *quondam* nurse and companion, vexed and disturbed although he was.

The intruder looked into the scornful eyes of the girl curiously.

"Speaking of throwing me overboard," he went on, "reminds me of Milan and what happened there. How would you fancy it, Miss Elfie Laselle, to be up in the tower of a mighty cathedral, on a platform protected only by a low railing—to be standing there, lost in admiration of blue skies and rosy mountains, far far above the earth—so far, that it would be almost dangerous to brave the giddiness of looking down; to be there alone, separated from the little group of friends below, you, a young, timid, dainty girl—and to suddenly become aware that behind you stood the remorseless hireling of your bitter enemy? How would you fancy the situation? Imagine it!—A powerful mulatto creeping with stealthy tread up those lonely stairs and standing behind you, so near that you felt his hot breath on your fair neck—that you heard his brutal heart throb! Imagine the numbing terror crawling like ice in every vein—the desperate look at the pitiless sky, the shuddering glance into the awful depths, while you know that the relentless fiend who has followed you thousands of miles has at length found his opportunity. Imagine his fierce grasp about your slim, soft waist—feel yourself, mute and paralyzed, but conscious, thrust out over that low parapet, dangling between heaven and earth in a murderer's clasp. Imagine that his hold relaxes and that you—"

The low, intense tone, the strange, intense, realistic manner, had held even the willful, contemptuous Elfie in thrall, listening in motionless silence as the man painted the word-picture; but now, as if his overwrought nerves would bear no more of the hideous story, Julien Laselle leaped to his feet so suddenly as to check the unfinished sentence, and with a cry as of unutterable horror, ran forward a few paces, staggered against the railing and reeled overboard.

When a man, dizzy and confused, tumbles headlong into the water like that, he is apt to go down like lead, and to be poorly prepared for a struggle when he reappears.

Elfie's wild screams rung far and wide, as the vessel, before it could be brought to, sped several lengths ahead; Aubrey and Rex each threw off his coat; but it was Rex who sprang into the sea.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BLOOMING OF THE BUD.

"She looks in the glass as she turns her head;
She knows that the rose on her cheek is red;
She knows how her dark eyes shine—how fair
Is the pale pink flower in her purple hair."

"SIXTEEN at last, papa! Sixteen at last, mamma!"

Elfie Laselle danced into the breakfast-room, bringing along with her on her white skirts an odor of lemon and orange-blossoms from the trees she had been among.

"I've been so impatient about it, it seemed as if this day would never come! I tell you, I feel old!—do I look any older than I did yesterday, *cher papa*? I feel inches taller and ages wiser. Am I as handsome as I ought to be at sixteen? Do I look my full age? Do you think if Mr. Chayce were here he would stop calling me 'child' and 'little girl' and 'fairy' and those other outrageous pet-names which made me feel so young? Say, papa, is your Elfie as charming as you hoped for at 'sweet sixteen'? Do put down that tiresome letter and pay a little attention to me!"

Julien Laselle folded his letter and looked up at the idol of his heart with eyes which, however others might read them, were never anything but tender and fond to their darling. "Charming"—was she charming? To him she was everything lovely and dear and bewitching; faultless in features, in speech, in manners, even her little bursts of temper had their fascination for him.

Perhaps it was because he cared so little for his dull, fretful, invalid wife that he thought so much more of his daughter. Then, too, never having had a son, all his pride and hope centered in her.

"There, papa, you've actually deigned to glance at me, at last! May I ask—" suddenly she espied two little packages beside her plate and pounced on them with a little cry of delight. "Oh, you dear good generous papa," she screamed, as untying the first from its wrappings, she came on a jewel-case containing a necklace and ear-rings of that condensed moonlight called pearls. "How lovely! And how costly, too! Mamma, this is *your* present, I suppose," picking up the other packet; but when she saw it had come express from New York a red flush stole up over neck, chin, cheek, to her forehead, and the small fingers quivered as she unfastened it.

It was only an exquisite fan of white satin, point-lace and sticks set thick with rose-diamonds; a little note lay in the box with it.

"May a friend venture to congratulate Elfie on having attained the mature age of sixteen summers?"

"Mr. Chayce always treats me as if I were a baby!" she pouted. "Never mind! If he comes here this spring, as he has promised, he will see for himself whether I am a child. His present is beautiful."

Drawing her supple figure to its graceful height she challenged her parents' admiring eyes. A Northern girl of eighteen would scarcely have been as much of a woman as Elfie. Lovely, indeed, she looked, and exulting in the consciousness of beauty, as stealing a jeweled hair-pin from her mother she caught up her own long braids and wreathed them in a dusky coronal about her small head.

"There! no more hair hanging down my back, school-fashion! I shall wear it up after this. That will add an inch or two to my height. I must study the language of the fan before Mr. Chayce's arrival," and she waved her handsome gift with affected languor before her sparkling, witching face. "By the way, mamma, where is *your* birthday gift to your beautiful daughter?"

"You will get it this evening, Elfie—not a minute sooner."

"Have you really the heart to tantalize me for ten long hours, mamma?"

"I have sent to New Orleans for it, and it will not arrive until afternoon."

"What is it? Do tell me what it is! I shall tease until you tell."

"It is only a new dress, daughter."

"Silk, mamma?"

"Satin, child."

"You darling angel! Made long, mamma?"

"We shall see when it comes."

"Delicious—delightful," cried Elfie, taking the steps of the latest waltz as she whirled about the table. "Papa," suddenly ceasing and settling like some brilliant tropical butterfly on the chair before her plate, "when is Mr. Chayce coming?—have you heard?"

"It is barely possible he may be here this afternoon, or to-morrow. This letter is from him, announcing his speedy coming. Why, Elfie, how pale you are!"

"Aren't people pale from pleasure, sometimes, papa?"

An attentive servant had placed a piece of broiled chicken before her; but the good news was told too soon—it spoiled her appetite—for the life of her, Elfie could not have swallowed a mouthful of solid food; but she sipped her chocolate and made a pretense of peeling an orange. Her great, soft, velvety eyes looked dreamily far away into space beyond the open window. All winter long she had lived in the intense expectation of this promised visit.

A girl's very first love is a strange passion, pure as the feelings of an angel, but more ardent, more utterly devoted than any after-love can possibly be; she dreams of him, who, to her, is everything, her world, her heaven—dreams of him with a sweet and holy shame that shrinks from its own thoughts; thrills at the sound of his voice, quivers in every pulse at his lightest look or touch—kisses the glove, the handkerchief, the flower which has fallen from his hand. To some girls this first love comes early; it is never spoken or guessed by any but herself; her burning idolatry springs up in flame-like flower, blossoms unseen, and dies—the only utterly beautiful phase of her whole life. She, herself, wonders and laughs at it two or three years later.

In Elfie's case, this first wild idolatry of the young heart—

"The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,"

threatened to come to something more than the seedless passion-flower of such a love usually does, for the reason that she held a curious belief that Aubrey Chayce was pledged to her—

that he was waiting for her to blossom into womanhood to make her his wife. Had it not been often and often jested about?—by the whole family, and by Aubrey himself? To her it was no jest; it was an earnest, passionate expectation.

She was thinking, as she looked out the window, that morning:

"He will surely speak this time. I am old enough, now, to be betrothed in a more formal fashion. Will he bring me an engagement ring, I wonder?"

An atmosphere of mystery brooded over Belle-Rivière that day. Elsie walked in the midst of it, quite innocent and unsuspecting. In fact, she spent far the larger part of the day in the shadowy nook where her hammock swung, dreaming of Aubrey's coming.

Late in the afternoon her mother sent for her to come and see the new dress, which Jeff had been sent to the town to bring from the express office. It had been removed from its box and spread out on the bed—a lovely peach-blossom satin, with sprays of pomegranate flowers embroidered around the train, and the front worked with seed pearls.

"Oh, mamma, I never imagined anything half so exquisite!"

"And, now, my dear, Phyllis will dress you in it. Mr. Chayce may arrive this evening, and I want you to look your prettiest."

It was a picture too charming to pass unobserved which was there in the large, airy, vine-shadowed chamber—the stately, handsome colored woman attiring her youthful mistress in the new robe and jewels; the handmaiden's grave importance, the girl's fluttering pleasure and impatience. The purpling masses of dark hair were twined about the little head and decorated with a spray of pomegranate, to match those on the robe. The necklace of pearls was fastened about the warm, round, slender neck of the creamiest brunette tinge; the rings were placed in the dainty ears; there were pomegranate blossoms nestled at the budding bosom; the long train was carefully spread out by Phyllis, and the new fan handed to her young lady, who stood before the mirror surveying herself with mingled admiration and anxiety.

"You is jus' as pritty as a rose, honey; no mistake."

"Yes, Phyllis, I do look mighty nice; but—there are very lovely, stylish ladies, plenty of them, where he lives. I wonder if he really will find me improved?"

"He can't help it, dahlin'. Powerful fine ladies in New York, I s'pose; but dey can't hold a candle to my missa, fer all dat! Don't you be afeerd, honey. You is jus' a merakle of distraction—a perfect merakle! Jus' you go down to de pahlors, an' be careful not to muss you' train; an' we'll see what we will see, 'fore many hours, honey."

An hour later, Elsie, carefully holding the peach-blossom train over one arm, walked up and down the piazza in the golden blaze of a full moon. Every witching influence of a tropical night was abroad; great magnolias opened their creamy cups to the dew; silvery jasmines glittered like stars; breath of strawberry and lemon came from afar; the long hedges of Cherokee roses were pink in the golden light.

"The carriage should be back by this time. If I have to wait another twenty-four hours I'll get Phyllis to fix me up a witch-potion of poppy or mandragora to put me to sleep till the time passes. I can't wait!" Elsie murmured, impatiently, gazing intently down the drive. "What will he say when he first sees me? Oh, what will he think of me? He sent me this fan by express; nevertheless, I am quite certain he will bring me a ring—put it on my finger himself!"

"There comes a carriage—two carriages!—three—four—a dozen! Why, what in the world is happening?"

Elsie stood quite still, with wide-open, shining eyes, the full moonlight falling over her beautiful face and dress, while suddenly a thousand lamps twinkled like fire-flies in the foliage of lawn and garden, and a low prelude of music arose behind a jasmine-trellis and swelled into a lovely measure from "Faust"—while swiftly arriving and alighting, with laughter, jests, congratulations, came her friends from far and near. Mr. Laselle had planned this birthday surprise for his daughter, and very much surprised she was and very much pleased.

"Now, if only Mr. Chayce comes," she said to her father, flushed and joyous, as he approached her.

"We shall know in half an hour. I have sent to the landing, and the carriage will soon

return. Are you really and completely surprised, Elsie?"

"Most completely, papa. I might have guessed, from my dress; but I did not—I thought the dress was solely for Mr. Chayce's benefit."

"My little elf has blossomed into a full-grown lady in this elegant dress. You are looking your best, darling; I hope you will have a happy, happy evening."

"Oh, I shall be only too happy," responded the girl, with a sigh of deep content. "It is you I am thinking of, papa; you have never been well since that accident in Newport Bay—never been the same. I don't like to enjoy myself when you are ill."

"I am not ill, Elsie; I have had great cares, but these are lightening now, day by day. Soon 'Richard will be himself again'; and the happier my darling is, the happier I am, always."

"That was a strange man," murmured the girl, thoughtfully. "What a strange story he told! Do you think he was insane, papa?"

"Of course, of course. What else could he have been? I saw that he was about to spring on you, Elsie—or imagined it—and leaped up to seize and restrain him, when I lost my footing and stumbled overboard."

"Yet it was he who saved you, dear papa. Mr. Chayce had off his coat, but the madman was the quickest—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Let us not recall that horrid time. Your guests, my—"

"Why, papa, here is the very man!"

Elsie said this in a low, hurried voice, turning pale as she spoke.

"The very man!" echoed Julien Laselle, with a start. Quickly he glanced about him—yes, there in the midst of the arriving guests, coming toward him, with a lady on either arm, was Rex.

Laselle turned a ghastly yellow; but his daughter did not notice it—she was looking at the younger of the ladies; a great many people were observing the strangers with polite curiosity because they were strangers; there was nothing to do but receive them with outward courtesy, though no other persons in the wide world could have been quite so unwelcome to Julien Laselle.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHICH SHALL IT BE?

And close behind them stepped the lily maid.

—TENNISON.

I have gone mad—I love you.

—IBID.

"WHERE have I seen the young lady?" Elsie was asking herself. She was conscious, in a vague way, of having some time met her, yet was unable to recall time or place.

A perfect lily of a girl, dressed with almost nun-like simplicity in pure, soft, clinging white, which fitted perfectly her supple, elegant figure. Two or three white roses nestled in her crimped, sunny, gold-brown hair; the delicate bloom of those white roses was like her face in hue—"her face, oh, call it fair, not pale"—a lovely face. The low white forehead under the glittering hair; the large drooped eyelids with their long lashes; the short upper lip, red and spirited, softly pressing its serious fellow; the delicately-rounded chin—looking down, as she was, when she approached her host and his daughter, the girl was perfect; when she raised her eyes, revealing those deep, dark wells of tender, lovely light, she was glorious.

Elsie was fascinated by this beauty, so different from her own.

"Allow me to present to you Mrs. St. John—and her daughter," spoke Rex, in that calm voice of his which always made an impression, "Mr. Laselle—Miss Laselle. Your note of invitation reached Mrs. St. John and was accepted; although Colonel St. John has not yet arrived to take possession of his plantation. I am

his agent—his confidential agent—and accompanied the ladies here as their escort at their request."

Laselle bowed stiffly to Rex, and gave his slender, patrician hand to the lady guests. Mrs. St. John wondered at its being so icy cold as she touched it with warm, cordial fingers for an instant.

She was a tall, magnificent brunette, dressed with extreme richness, wearing jewels that far outshone those of any other lady present; looking not over thirty-two or three—too young to be the mother of the fair lily by her side; nor was there a point of resemblance between them.

Many questions were asked of Mr. Laselle as to who they were—these lovely and distinguished-looking ladies.

"All I know of them is this," was his answer. "A very wealthy South American, by name Colonel St. John, has purchased the plantation adjoining my own, having come to the United States to spend the money made in Bolivian silver mines, and intending to spend a portion of each year at the South. He has also purchased a residence in New York, on Fifth avenue, adjoining Mr. Chayce's. It may have been Chayce's recommendation of our parish which induced him to buy here—I don't know. They are people whose acquaintance you need not hesitate to make; for I received from Chayce a letter of introduction to them, begging me to call on them. When I called, with my letter, the ladies were out. Of course I invited them to my daughter's birthday party. This is the first time I have met them. The colonel, I am told, has not yet come on from New York, but sent his wife and daughter on; to escape the March winds of the North."

This was what, with cordial courtesy, Julien Laselle told all who inquired; what he said to himself, with secret rage and fear, was:

"The devil is to pay! Here is this fellow again! What is he up to now? He has taken an agency from this Colonel St. John so as to be near me, to threaten and torment me. As I was beginning to forget! Great God! is the ghost of that girl to haunt me forever—drive me into my grave—or madness? It was not I who murdered her. It was not I who even hinted at so diabolical a deed. Pierre misunderstood my instructions. I bade him frighten her—shadow and terrify her—until he extorted a promise from her to give up her silly claims. I never dreamed the fellow would dare go beyond the letter of his instructions. She is dead, but I did not murder her. The estates are Elsie's now beyond a doubt. I ought to be content—feeling that I am not to blame for the worst, and now, when I have struggled months for peace of mind, comes this man to awaken memory—to call up phantoms of the dead from that dreadful battle-field—to make me shrink under the gaze of his eyes. Who is he—what is he? Would to Heaven I could settle that question in my own mind. When he is absent I persuade myself that I exaggerate a chance resemblance; when he is present—when I meet his look, the strange conviction returns. At all events, he is down here again, to make me trouble."

Meantime Phyllis had made her way to where her young mistress was still standing to receive her guests.

"I reckon he's comin', honey; I hear de wheels far 'way down de road, if you'd like to go out on de po'ch to see him derive."

"Indeed I would, Phyllis! I couldn't meet him before all these people!"

"Jus' so, dahlin'. I understands," whispered the colored woman, with a beaming smile; and Elsie stole out of the crowded rooms onto the moonlit piazza.

Dancing had not begun, nor had the guests yet scattered about the porches and grounds as they would soon do; they were making their compliments to Madame Laselle in her armchair in the back parlor, and there were no jealous ones to criticise Elsie as she ran out on the steps and stood there, under an arch of jasmine and roses, in the soft blaze of the full moonlight, to welcome her Northern visitor.

The carriage which had been sent to the steamboat-landing whirled up, and Aubrey Chayce, springing lightly to the ground, confronted the bright apparition on the steps. It was a moment before he recognized the beautiful young lady.

"In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls," who stood there, with throbbing bosom and thrilling veins, with downcast lashes and changing color.

"Elsie, is it you?" he cried, at last, in laughing surprise. "Is this my little fairy, in a train, with her elfin locks 'done up?' Well! you are lovely, mademoiselle! You take my breath away! But, what am I going to do for the little girl who swung me in her hammock and pelted me with roses? What am I going to do for my little sweetheart? My lady, at sixteen, is no longer kissable!"

He took her hand and put it to his lips with a smiling pretense of formality; she gave him a swift, shy look and the burning color rushed over her face; then the tears rose in her eyes—she could not speak—her heart was swelling in her throat—and, as her father came out, she turned and hurried into the house.

What was the matter with Elsie? Aubrey's light, careless, playfully-affectionate manner had jarred on her intense mood. She had waited and longed—had gone out to meet him, her soul on her lips, in passionate expectancy—and

she had been disappointed. To be folded in his arms, to have the kiss of betrothal pressed on her lips, the ring slipped on her finger, was what she had expected.

"He saw that I was no longer to be treated as a child," she thought, scarcely knowing that she was taking her place with a partner at the head of a set of waltzing-quadrilles. "He was surprised—and he will be pleased, when he has time to think of it. To-morrow, doubtless, when we are alone, out under the cypresses, he will tell me all that is in his heart."

As soon as he had changed his dress Aubrey Chayce came into the thronged rooms, where he was pleasantly greeted by the acquaintances he had made the previous year. Elfie's glowing eyes followed him as he went from one to another. What a king he looked, so tall and broad-shouldered, with his beautiful gold-crowned head and his easy manners, so careless and graceful, yet reserved! Her heart throbbed with love and pride. And now he approaches Madame St. John and her daughter where they stand by the flower-filled mantle.

Ah! he knows them! Yes, to be sure, her father told the gentlemen that Colonel St. John had a residence in New York adjoining Mr. Chayce's and he had asked her father to make their acquaintance.

The side couples were balancing and going through their part of the figure, which gave Elfie two or three minutes to watch the meeting.

The lily girl, with the long eyelashes, looked up at Aubrey as he drew near, and a soft rose-color tinged her face. He spoke to Madame St. John, shaking hands with her, and then, to Elfie's quick apprehension, he held the small white hand of the younger lady a moment longer than he had the mother's; after which he remained by them a little time; as soon, however, as Elfie had finished her first dance, he came to engage her for the next, and stood gayly chatting with her until the waltz began. Again he complimented her on her appearance.

"I don't wonder you were anxious to be sweet sixteen," he said.

She thanked him for the costly fan which had come to her that morning; then the notes of the Fatinitza waltz began and he raised her little hand to his shoulder and bore her away on the wings of the melody.

"Light as the down of the thistle"

she floated along the floor in his strong sustaining arms; while her father, covertly watching them, while chatting with a friend, thought what a graceful, brilliant, well-matched pair they were.

Elfie had quite recovered her joyous spirits before the long waltz ended. Her father was rich and powerful—she was young and beautiful—what had Mr. Chayce come again for to Belle-Rivière, if not to woo and win, according to the old understanding? For half an hour she was happiest of the happy.

"Why should I wish him to dance with me every time?—and those ladies are strangers here—he does just right to pay them attention." Thus she solaced herself when Aubrey led out the lovely Miss St. John for the dance following; yet she could not but watch the two so intently as to hear nothing of the silly compliments which her own partner whispered in her ear.

Shortly after this she missed them both; Aubrey had taken his fair companion through the open French window onto the piazza, where they were slowly walking up and down in the cooler air.

Mrs. St. John was seated by Madame Laselle giving her some particulars of life in South America. Almost rudely Elfie refused the gentleman who was asking for the Lancers, and remained in the shadow of the drawn-back curtain looking out at those two promenaders.

She was pale and her breath came heavily. Presently she laughed.

"I do believe I am jealous!" she said, to herself. "How absurd! Aubrey will get tired of me if I never let him speak to any young lady but myself. I must not play the tyrant. How fair she is! I wonder if he prefers blonde to brune! Perhaps he loves her, after all! She has lived near him there in New York"—again she grew pale as the idea of their possible friendship came home to her with force.

Then she saw Aubrey lay a fleecy scarf of some white material over the head and shoulders of the stranger, offer her his arm, and the two walk away down the steps and the glistening shell-paved alley of roses and oleanders. An instant Elfie hesitated only to decide to follow them. Was it dishonorable? She did not

care to ask herself. A tempest of jealousy raged in her soft bosom.

"They stray away by themselves—like lovers!" was her comment.

Never in her life had Elfie done what she considered a mean action. Quick-tempered, willful, imperious, she had yet prided herself on her high sense of truth and honor. In a moment, pride and principle were swept away by a storm of passion. Stealthily she glided through the window, took her train on her arm, and followed the retreating figures down the winding alley over whose white floor the black shadows of the shrubs were thrown in silhouette.

The large round moon hung like a golden shield against the sky; a nightingale sent forth bubbling notes from a hidden bower of spicery; magnolia and orange blossoms scented the night air.

The pair she was following came to a pause beside a group of tall oleanders where the walk came out into a broader one; they could not see her; but she, by bending a branch down which reached out a flowering arm between herself and them, had a perfect view of them.

The "lily maid's" hand had dropped from her companion's arm; they stood a little apart, she with her great dark eyes fixed upon the glorious heaven, he with his blue eyes spellbound to her lovely face; there was silence between them until suddenly her glance fell and met his, and a blush, quite vivid enough to show in the bright moonlight, swept up to her very forehead. He drew a step nearer.

"I was thinking of something in the past," she said, as if to explain her blush.

"So was I," he answered; "something singular, and—in one way—sweet; though other wise embarrassing."

"Tell me what it was."

"You will think me excessively vain."

"I promise not to."

"Well, it was this. One year ago this very night, in this very spot, here by these oleanders, a lady, unknown and masked—and doubtless beautiful—declared that she loved me. To this day I have not the faintest idea who the lady might be. Was not that an adventure?"

"Did she seem in earnest, this unknown fair one?"—the lily girl had averted her face on pretense of gathering a rose.

"She did. There was sincerity in her every tone."

"What did you say to her in return?"

"I gave her a ring—a valuable ruby—as a token between us. I sometimes fear the lady may reveal the ring to me some day."

"Why do you fear it?" asked Miss St. John, looking full at him, now, without a tremble in her low, soft voice.

Aubrey Chayce pulled at his fair mustache, looked up at the moon—there was momentary embarrassment on his countenance; then, as by a brave effort, he recovered his composure, and answered:

"It would be painful to me, because I could not return her feeling; I love another!"

"Oh!" came from the girl's lips, almost like a cry of remonstrance; then, forcing a melancholy smile, she went on: "The reason is a sufficient one."

"Yes, I love another. For the first time in my life I love a woman well enough to ask, to beg her to become my wife! I had thought to live an independent life till I met this sweet, this adorable woman, who makes me feel, to the very core of my heart, how much nobler my life will be if I can win her to share it with me."

There was a pause, broken by the bubbling notes of the mocking-bird. Elfie, leaning, looking, listening, with white cheeks, and eyes of fire, caught her breath, and a sudden light flashed over her face.

"He is speaking of me," she thought.

"You mean Miss Laselle?" scarcely more than whispered the lily girl.

"Miss Laselle? An exquisite child—nothing more! No! I mean you—you alone—none other but you—you, the sweet fulfillment of my loveliest dream of what a woman should be!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CATHEDRAL TOWER.

Then came a sparrow-hawk to the tree,

The little bird to slay;

Then came a ship from over the sea

To take that woman away.

—OWEN MEREDITH.

IN that terrible moment when little Claire closing her shuddering senses in unconsciousness, hung between heaven and earth in the grasp of the would-be murderer, God was sending her aid of which the poor child could never

have dreamed. A firm step was springing lightly up that dizzy winding stair; a keen eye, a strong arm were drawing near—ah, but both were nearly paralyzed when Rex came out on the platform behind the guilty wretch and realized the frightful scene. Great God! a cry, an unwary movement would be certain to precipitate the impending doom! For three-quarters of a second his whole being was chained in the grasp of an icy horror, while the mulatto, with nerves of steel and tense muscles, his teeth and eyes gleaming, held the limp, drooping form over the dread abyss.

For three-quarters of a second! Then, swift and silent as lightning, Rex sprung beside the scoundrel, flung one powerful arm about him and the other about his victim, and staggered back and sunk to the floor, dragging the two back with him.

There was no struggle after that.

As soon as the colored man saw that he was detected, he gave up entirely. It was the seeming absolute safety of the deed which had tempted him. He cowered at the feet of the man whose eyes seemed to have a strange power over him. Rex was on his knees—little Claire lay senseless over his arm; the mulatto, crouching and shivering, looked up at the newcomer like a beaten dog.

"Pierre."

The fellow shivered and rolled his eyes, but uttered no sound.

"You would murder the daughter of your dead young master?"

Still the mulatto only trembled and stared with dilated eyes.

"You know who I am?"

"Oh Lord! Oh Lord!" groaned the valet.

"You know who I am! I see it in your face. Well! for this deed I have thwarted, I can hang you higher than Haman. Better, I can shoot you now, like the dog you are."

"Shoot—shoot, mastah. I am willing."

Indeed, the miserable, crouching creature looked as if he would rather die than live, so utterly discomfited, so guilty and ashamed.

"No, Pierre, I am not so bad as you; I cannot kill a human being in cold blood. Now that the danger to *her* is over, live and repent. But this you must do: you must start for Liberia to-night, and there you must remain one year, without one word of communication with your master Julien. After the year expires, if he has use for you, he is welcome to you. I require no oath of obedience from you; I could not trust your word, *but I can trust your fears*. Do you remember the third day of the battle of the Wilderness, the scene under the oak tree by the spring? 'Dead men tell no tales.' Ay, but *living* men, Pierre? Go you to Liberia and remain there one year. Make straight for the Mediterranean—any port from whence you can take passage for Algiers—the journey is not a long one. There live an honest life, and hold your peace; meddle not between the soul of Victor Laselle and his brother. Have you money for the voyage?"

"Yes, mastah."

"Then go!"

The Czar of all the Russias could not have ~~gotten~~ with greater authority or been more ~~obeyed~~. Pierre, whose rich golden skin ~~had faded~~ to a curious leaden hue, and who still ~~trembled~~ in every limb, dragged himself to the stairs and disappeared.

By this time Claire had opened her great dark eyes and lay looking up into Rex's face like one who sees a vision. Presently she reached up a little satin palm and stroked his face.

"Why, Rex, dear Rex, is this you?" she asked, with a dreamy smile.

"Ay, little Claire, your faithful old Rex, come all the way across the blue water to take care of his little girl." His voice was choked and there was a mist in his eyes.

"Then, where am I?" she spoke again, still in the same dreamy way; and lifting her head a little she gave an inquiring glance around.

No sooner did her eyes encounter the low railing and the distant mountains flushing rosy against the purpling sky, than she gave a gasp and fainted dead away again. Having nothing to revive her, Rex took her in one arm and groped his way down to the roof—no easy task, under the circumstances; there Claire's companions, who had been obliged to abandon their intended visit to the tower-platform, and were wondering at her long stay, came forward with expressions of alarm, and looks of inquiry at the stranger.

"I found Miss Mason quite overcome by a fright given her by a colored man—you saw him descend, I presume. I am a friend of the young lady's, just over from New York. Have

you smelling-salts? I will remain to assist her down and call a carriage—with your permission. My name is Rex."

"Yes, we have heard Claire speak of you," said Miss Everett, relieved at having an American gentleman to help them out of their difficulty. "I have some *sal volatile*. Oh, that horrid mulatto! I thought he looked wicked when he passed us!"

They got her home; and in the evening, when she was so far recovered as to be able to sit up in an easy-chair Rex came again and had a long talk with her. He found that her nervous system had suffered a shock from which she would not cease to suffer for some time; the least reference to her remaining in Milan after he went away, threw her into despair, although Rex assured her that she would never again be in danger from Pierre.

"I shall never walk out, or pray in church, or waken in the night that I shall not feel him creeping up to murder me," she shuddered.

"Then, Claire, why not do what I, of all things, most wish you to do: give up music, as a profession, and quit Milan?"

"What can I do, Rex? I have only the little money still left from my father's legacy—not enough to keep me a year. I had hoped, when I became a great singer, to earn money to contest my rights with my uncle; to win the acknowledgment of my right to my father's name and to the estate which was willed to Victor, not to Julien Laselle. It is hard to give up these hopes—harder than to give up life. Besides, what can I do but sing to earn my bread?"

"Become my adopted daughter, little Claire."

"But you, too, are poor. You cannot afford it"—she did not add what she deeply felt. "No other man can seem like a father to me—I cherish too proudly and too fondly the memory of that young hero who was my father."

Yet Rex—with that peculiar intuition which seemed to lay bare before him the thoughts of others, and which gave him a certain power which all who came in contact with him acknowledged—knew of what she was thinking, and said, with a pleasant laugh:

"Not that I am worthy to take the place of Colonel Laselle—he was beautiful, chivalric, a splendid gentleman, while I am—what I am—but I can love you sincerely, little Claire, and be to you what you sorely need—an honest, faithful friend and protector."

Claire looked up gratefully into the thin, dark, grave face, with its wonderful deep-set eyes, that were fixed upon her anxiously.

"You are the dearest friend I have on earth, Rex—the *only* friend! It does not seem possible but that some strange tie binds us together; I suppose, because you have been so good to me."

"I am good to you because I knew Colonel Laselle so well; and because you are so helpless and so lovely. And now, before you decide about returning with me, I will tell you something which will surprise you. I am not so poor as I have chosen to appear. I am the confidential agent of a very rich gentleman, who has mines in Bolivia and Brazil; I have a handsome salary from him; I came to the United States on business for him. He has lately requested me to find and furnish him a house in New York city; for he is our countryman by birth, and having two young children to educate he has concluded to make a home in New York. He is not himself ready to quit South America for some months, but desires his wife and children to come on in October. There is only one person in the world whom Mrs. St. John holds in higher regard than she does me, and that is her husband. If I ask her to permit you to become a member of her family, she will be eager to have you do so; besides, I can fully promise for her, that she will delight in your society and consider you a great acquisition. She is passionately fond of music, and a young lady who can be a friend and companion and who has a voice like yours, will be a treasure to her. She is rich enough to indulge her whims—can afford to make a pet of you; and you will be very happy with her. Then, too," he added, with a grave smile, "I think of choosing a house in the same block as Mr. Chayce's residence; there is one for sale there, I hear."

Little Claire's heart gave a great bound against the ruby ring; try as she might, she could not quite keep the pink from coming into her pale cheeks at the mention of Aubrey Chayce's name.

"What do you think of the new life I have planned for you, little Claire?"

"If I could be sure the lady would really need me and like me, I should be only too glad to give up this struggle," she answered, her great

dark eyes blazing with a new animation. "It is so terrible to feel oneself *hunted—pursued*," she added, with a shudder.

"And little Claire was never made to live alone," said Rex, kindly. "Well, Claire, then I shall consider it settled; for I can assure you that Mrs. St. John will be charmed. All I fear is that *she* will want to adopt my little ward; also, that she will utterly spoil you with petting and jewels and silk attire, little nun," smiling affectionately into the bright, eager face he thought so lovely.

"Perhaps, too, when she knows me well, she will help me to establish my rights," mused Claire.

"I shall make that my business," said Rex. "I want that privilege. I will not ask you to come to me until Mrs. St. John is in her house, so that you may have the shelter of her protection. Meantime, go on with your lessons, here, for a couple of months. Pierre will be in Liberia; he knows me better than to dare return here to trouble you. You will be brave for a few weeks longer, Claire?"

She promised—with such reluctance that he would gladly have remained near her, if affairs in New York had not called him back.

We know, on his return, of his visit to Newport, which was made for the sole purpose of inflicting on Julien Laselle the pangs of remorse and fear of discovery. Even after rescuing him from the water, he allowed him to believe that Pierre had put the girl out of his way, forever—in fact, Rex disappeared as soon as the party landed, that evening, in Newport bay.

Julien Laselle had made his own explanations to young Chayce. With a subtlety in keeping with his character, he had made it appear that Claire Mason was little short of an adventuress—one of those females who, having discovered some family fault or misfortune, by means of which they can trade on the fears or pride of wealthy members, use their knowledge to force black-mail from their victims. As to anything which might have happened to her abroad—he was ignorant of it; if she had met with a fatal accident, he was sorry for it; but he could only regard her as a bold, bad young woman. As to this fellow who had taken up the cudgels for her—very likely he hoped to make money out of the affair.

Aubrey Chayce felt disappointed in Rex; he had taken a wonderful fancy to him; but Aubrey was quite well, now, and leading a gay life in Newport, so that he soon forgot all about his *quondam* nurse and the little opera-singer, who had given his friend Laselle some trouble.

Meantime, Rex, as agent for the absent Mr. St. John, had purchased an elegant house adjoining Chayce's on Fifth avenue; a ship-load of costly, curious foreign furniture, pictures, porcelain, rugs, had arrived, and been transferred to the mansion; and, two weeks later, by steamer from Rio Janeiro, a beautiful, stately, Southern-looking lady, with two handsome children—a boy of ten, and a girl of eight—and half a dozen servants; and soon a new home was established which could not be surpassed for taste, luxury, and a certain quaint, artistic air, by any other on that famous avenue. And, long before Christmas, little Claire was the light of that home; her beautiful voice its inspiration; her soft, loving nature putting out tendrils, clinging to all about it; her lovely face its pride and pleasure; while the young millionaire, next door, had fallen helplessly, irresistibly, irrevocably in love with her, without the faintest suspicion that he had seen her in any other character than as the idol of this refined, elegant household. A girl's looks change rapidly at Claire's age; dress and circumstance had changed her more.

CHAPTER XIX.

PASSION-FLOWERS.

"Oh, have I found thee, my soul's soul?
My chosen forth from time and space?"

"Ah, sister," answered Lancelot, "what is this?"
—TENNYSON.

"TELL me that I am not too bold—too premature!" urged Aubrey Chayce—"that I have not startled you by my rash words. I meant not to have spoken until I had won some sign of preference from you."

"And have you won no sign of preference from me?" asked the girl, a divine blush stealing over brow and bosom as she looked at him with both tears and smiles in her beautiful eyes.

"Never—not one! You are so modest—so reserved—almost cold. I cannot tell whether you are utterly indifferent to me, or whether—you like me a little. Now that I have committed myself, you must answer me," he seized her hands and looked closely into her eyes; "you

must say if you think you can learn to love your lover."

As he drew her soft white-robed figure closer to him, the fan and handkerchief she held were dropped from her hand—involuntarily, in her sweet confusion, she stooped to gather them up, and something fell from her bosom and rolled glittering along the path.

"What is that?" cried Aubrey.

Both sprung for the shining jewel at the same instant; Aubrey was the first to grasp it.

"Give it to me! Do not look at it; but give it to me," she cried, with mingled tones of entreaty and command, turning white in the moonlight.

"Do not look at it." Indeed, it is from some lover then!"

"It is. I demand that you return it to me without looking."

"It is a ring," declared Aubrey, whose fingers were closed tightly over it. "If it is an engagement-ring, Miss St. John, why do you not wear it openly, and so save other men from breaking their hearts?"

"It is not an engagement-ring—I give you my word of honor."

Perhaps something familiar in the size and shape of the jewel struck the jealous lover at that moment—he deliberately opened his hand and there in his palm lay his own ruby ring.

"My ring!" he muttered, incredulously.

Then, looking up inquiringly at his lovely companion and seeing the red roses burning in her cheeks, the long lashes drooping, the whole sweet face and form eloquent with the soft guilt of confession, he gathered her in one arm and with his other had lifted her downcast face until the shy eyes could no longer avoid his.

"You love me! You love me!" he cried, triumphantly.

"Better now than when I told you so a year ago."

"My darling! my angel! But—you were in South America a year ago!" he added, puzzled.

They were too deeply interested in themselves to notice the shivering of the oleander boughs beside them, that shook and stirred as though a heavy wind had dashed the dew from them.

"How came you here that night, my darling?"

"I cannot explain it all to you now, Mr. Chayce. It is a long story—you shall know it all—all—to-morrow. What will mamma say to our remaining away so long? Indeed, we must return to the house."

"First, tell me that you love me."

"You know that I do—better than my life."

"A thousand thanks, my pure white lily—my dove."

"Will you come now, Mr.—"

"Call me Aubrey, and I obey."

"Will you come, Aubrey? We are staying too long."

"So, Aubrey Chayce, you are a flirt, are you?"

They had turned to walk back to the house when they were confronted by Elsie: not Elsie laughing, teasing, bewitching, childish—but Elsie, more like a beautiful Fury than a young girl.

She stood directly in their path, her face pale and set, her straight black brows drawn in a fierce scowl, her eyes darting flame, only her mouth wreathed with a scornful smile.

"If you believe a word that he says to you, Miss St. John, you will make a fool of yourself—as I have! He and I have been promised to each other for months and months—it is an understood thing in the family that he is to marry me when I am old enough—papa expects it, and has talked it over with him. What *right* has he to make love to you? There is only one punishment for falsehood—treachery! Julien Laselle is not the man to allow his daughter to be trifled with!—when I have told him that his friend has been false and has broken my heart, there will be a challenge to the traitor—this matter will be settled with blood, as it deserves to be! And my father is a dead-shot," she added, with a strange smile.

"Broken your heart! Elsie, my dear child, what does this mean?" remonstrated Aubrey, in distress and surprise.

"A part of the flirt's game," she retorted, bitterly. "To affect now to regard me as a child! A coward's game! But it will not excuse you, sir. You have made love to me since the first day you came to Belle-Rivière. Have you not called me your little wife? Did not papa say to you that he hoped your friendship would be cemented by a marriage with his daughter? Did you not jest about it—seem pleased? You must have known how I regarded it! You must have known that what was sport to you was death to me."

She crushed in her small hands the fan he

had given her, and tossed it contemptuously into the shrubbery.

"I despise you!" she said, with a flash of the great, glowing eyes.

"Better so than to love me, Elsie! You have made a mistake, that is all; taken jesting and light words in earnest; brooded over 'airy nothings' in secret. Heaven knows I have never for one hour thought of you as anything but a bright, lovable child. Did your father and I jest—too carelessly, perhaps—about the future? I had never thought of marriage—considered myself a confirmed bachelor—and how did I know, should I ever change my mind, but that Elsie, grown to womanhood, might be my choice? As apt to be my little fairy as any one!—and so the stupid jest ran on. Blame your father as much as you blame me, Elsie!—he is equally culpable: more so, for he knew more of Southern precociousness than I. The maidens I have known best have been school-girls at your age, Elsie. Even after what has been said by you, I cannot look upon your feeling for me as anything more serious than a childish fancy. When you know what the love of men and women is, Elsie, you will laugh at this little outbreak of vanity and temper. Come, my fairy, my little elfland sweetheart, let us be friends still."

He held out his hand with a winning smile in his blue eyes. That smile would have melted the girl's fierce mood had she been alone with him—but not with Miss St. John looking on.

"I will never touch your hand again—never! It is the hand of a household foe," and whirling from them, she walked rapidly back to the lighted house, all ablaze with lamps and music and flowers and gay people trifling away the hours of festival.

Aubrey stood silent a little time, unutterably pained and perplexed.

"I am quite confounded," he murmured at last. "Poor little proud Elsie! I remember, now, that she has often embarrassed me by her frank references to her feeling for me. I took it the more certainly to be only a child's preference because she was so outspoken about it. I never guessed she was seriously treasuring up the gay jests which passed between her father and myself. And she has blossomed from the bud to the flower so suddenly in the six months since I saw her last! Miss St. John, I was in heaven half an hour ago; I am very happy yet, for she I love loves me"; but I am in a dreadful predicament. To be called a dastard and a traitor by the daughter of one's host! And I am wretched, too, at wounding that dear child's pride and feelings. I have the affection for her of a brother for a young sister. I confess that I do not know what to say, how to act."

"Poor little tropical passion-flower! What a rage she was in, and how beautiful she looked! I am fascinated by her, myself, Mr. Chayce. For the life of me, I don't see how you can choose a pale, quiet creature like me with that splendid—"

"Hush, hush! It is because you are 'pale and quiet,' as you word it—divinely modest and reserved, my lily, my white lily!—that I love you. I have known women as beautiful—splendid, glorious women, whose regard was a high honor—but not one *just like you*, my pearl of pearls! The poet says—

"God never formed a soul
Without its own peculiar mate."

I came very near missing 'my own peculiar mate,' but I have found her now—and she loves me—she is mine!"

"Ah, if you knew all, perhaps—"

"Perhaps what, sweet one?"

"You would not feel as you do toward me. There may be a bitter disappointment in store for you, Mr. Chayce."

She looked up at him with such real trouble in her soft eyes that Aubrey was puzzled what to make of it; however, he had little time to study the problem, as she hurried toward the house, conscious that their absence would be observed.

For an innocent man—innocent of all intention of wrong—Aubrey felt very guilty as he encountered Mr. Laselle shortly after leaving Miss St. John with her mother. A deep red flush came over his blonde features as his host stepped quickly up to him, evidently laboring under great excitement. To be accused of having trifled with his daughter was the least the young man expected; but the surprise Julien Laselle had in store for him was of a different nature.

"Aubrey, for God's sake, look closely at Miss St. John and tell me if you have not seen her before!"

"Seen her before! Certainly, Mr. Laselle;

she has been a near neighbor of mine for two or three months, as I told you."

"Ah! so you did—so you did! Is it possible, in all that time, you never suspected—never recognized this young lady as sailing under false colors?"

"Sailing under false colors!" echoed the lover, indignantly; then, remembering the girl's own words, a sudden fear of something wrong shot like a fiery arrow through his heart.

"I cannot be mistaken," went on Laselle, in a low voice, but with a manner of intense, illy-controlled agitation; "I was impressed, the instant I looked at her—and now the certain conviction has come upon me! That girl is none other than Claire Mason, the chorus-singer—the bold, bad young woman who—knowing her claims to be preposterous, illegal, infamous—made a cunning endeavor to obtain half my property. A regular adventuress, Aubrey!—hand in glove with that other adventurer who has taken up her cause! I believed her dead. I might have known such a fraud would not die easily! She is here for no good purpose; I am to have more trouble with her. It takes these saintly-looking women to play the very devil at black-mail!"

Absorbed in his own feelings he did not notice the livid hue which crept over the proud features of the young aristocrat. Claire Mason, a chorus-singer, hardened to the work of the stage, nameless, parentless, with the disgrace of her birth her only heritage—perhaps the adventuress this gentleman declared her to be!—was this the lily of purity to whom, in his reverence, he had almost feared to whisper the holy name of Love?

Back on his memory rushed that scene under the oleanders one year ago to-night. Would any but an adventuress have told her love, as this girl had done, that night? And the seeming accident of her dropping his ring, this evening!—was not this a part of the plot by which she schemed to secure a rich husband?—"For, alas, I am very rich!" thought the unhappy lover.

CHAPTER XX.

A GIRL'S LOVE.

All night has the casement jessamine stirred
To the dancers dancing in tune;
Till a silence fell with the waking bird,
And a hush with the setting moon.

—TENNYSON.

"MR. CHAYCE—Aubrey—forgive me what I said last night! I was beside myself. Oh, why have you remained out all night in this deadly damp? You will be ill—and I—I will have been the cause! Your coat is all wet with dew," sighed Elsie, laying her slender hand on his shoulder, and looking up in his face with eyes whose expression would have melted any man's heart.

In the dim light of the early dawn her beautiful face looked wan and pale. The splendid toilet of the previous evening had been laid aside; she was in one of her white morning-dresses, and the thick glory of her dark hair clung about her like a cloud. This was no child looking up into Aubrey's face, but a young, lovely woman, every fiber of whose being was alive with feeling for him. He realized it with painful force as he returned her look.

After the guests had gone from Belle-Rivière he had spent the remainder of the night in the garden, walking the flower-bordered alleys, or sitting on the bench under the oleanders.

The words Miss Laselle had spoken to him—words of insult and violence—had been sufficient to forbid his sleeping under her father's roof again; yet, consideration for her and his host forbade his taking a sudden leave, which would be sure to excite remark; so he had chosen to walk away the brief remainder of that night, intending to make his adieu to Mr. Laselle when that gentleman arose in the morning; also to offer him any opportunity he might desire, if he should prove as hot-headed as his daughter, and consider that he had reason to demand the sort of reparation found in a duel.

Laselle, being told by a servant that Massa Chayce was smoking a cigar outside, had retired ignorant of the scene between him and Elsie; for the girl, despite her passionate declaration of what she was going to tell her father, had not found it so easy to confess her anger and disappointment, even to her doting parent.

Chayce had not thought much of Elsie during those long, dark hours between two o'clock and dawn. His own disappointment absorbed him. His feelings had undergone a complete revolution since he had discovered in the fair, proud lady of his love, the young chorus-singer, whom he had first seen, in short skirt and scarlet jack-

et, on the boards of a theater. In the conflict of his emotions if there was any one passion uppermost, it was anger at having been deceived—he called it deception.

Anger, contempt, and something resembling hate, warred with love.

If hearts are ever "caught on the rebound," as they say, Aubrey Chayce's heart was in a fair way of being captured by this girl, now, who had stolen out to him, through the dim morning, to beg his forgiveness for the wild words which her fierce jealousy had hurled out of her bosom a few hours before.

It was a magic hour, and Elsie was magically lovely, with her dark hair unbound, her face pale with sleepless vigils, her eyes shining dark as midnight—softly swimming in starry light—lovely, loving, willing, humble, penitent; standing before him, her timid hand on his shoulder; her breath and bosom palpitating: all the witchery of glistening, fragrant foliage, of twittering waking birds, of heavy morning perfumes, of stillness and solitude shutting them in together.

"Your coat and your hair are so damp, dear Aubrey—and I am to blame! Please come into the house—at least into the library until papa is up. I have been at my window for hours, waiting for you to come in, until I could bear it no longer. I am not angry with you, now, Aubrey. I see everything in a different light, now that I am no longer in such a passion. I know that you never have tried to win my love—never did encourage the foolish speeches I was always making—that, on the contrary, you often wounded my feelings by laughing at me as a little girl. I can see that it was only the fixed idea papa put into my silly head, that you were to marry me some day, that made me so blind—made me take everything for granted! You are not to blame—no, not in the least!—and I ask your forgiveness. I don't want you to break friendship with papa; he is very fond of you; your society is a great solace to him; and he does not seem to be very happy, lately, for some reason. Papa need not know what a little fool I have made of myself; and I—I will struggle—to—overcome this unfortunate feeling. I will try to be only your friend, dear Aubrey. And, some day, when papa learns that you love—another and fairer and better girl than his poor little Elsie—he will grow—reconciled to it."

The low, musical voice shook and quivered like the sprays of orange-blossoms under the weight of birds and finally broke down in a faint sob; the soft little hand clutched his shoulder, the poor, proud little head drooped and drooped until the dark hair touched his breast. The spectacle of haughty, high-spirited Elsie humbled and begging his pardon—the sight of her grief—the consciousness of the mad, utter adoration she felt for him—all this thrilled and melted Aubrey into a tenderness which was indeed, perhaps, only pity, but might easily be something more.

"I do forgive you, Elsie, all the wild words spoken last night. I would give much to remain friends with you and yours. I never loved you so dearly as I do this moment, or admired you so much; for I do love you as a man may love a dear younger sister. It may even be—" here he came to an abrupt pause.

What was Aubrey Chayce about to say? If that revulsion of feeling which had come over him toward Claire he had nearly sworn to himself that he would have his revenge by marrying the girl who really did love him with such self-forgetful abandon.

Why not make Elsie Laselle happy, if his own love-affair was to end in bitter disappointment? Elsie was beautiful and bright and above reproach in birth and surroundings—and foolishly, supremely infatuated with him! Why not marry her?

Up before his memory floated the face so like his dream of the "lily maid of Astolat"—fair as a flower, serene as heaven; a face not like this beautiful face on his breast, all sunshine, storm, laughter or frowns, but sweet, steady, exquisitely pure; a girl's face such as he had made pictures of in his fancy since he was a young man, and beside of which, in comparison, the witching, or handsome, or piquant, or beautiful faces of the young ladies he met in society were always losing.

He remembered the first time he called on his neighbor, Mrs. St. John, and there, in that great drawing-room—crowded with furniture, pictures, bric-a-brac, which he saw at a glance were priceless, and lighted only by the soft silvery luster of wax candles—had seen, standing before a dark-blue embroidered curtain which set her off like a frame to a picture, the slight, tall girl, robed in clinging white with a cluster

of hills-of-the-valley at her neck, whose face was the reality of his ideal.

"What may ever be, dear Aubrey?" Elsie had quickly drawn back her head and was gazing up into his face with shining eyes.

An evil spirit urged the words which arose to his lips:

"That I have been mistaken in my feeling for Miss St. John."

A sudden light flashed over the dark beauty of the listener's face.

"Are you in earnest, Aubrey? What will she think?"

He blushed and frowned.

"Elsie, I believe I am what the Scotch call a little 'daft' this morning," putting his hand to his forehead. "My head aches, and I am stupid. Pay no attention to what I say until I come to my senses again."

"Come into the house, Aubrey. I shall be wretched if this exposure makes you ill. We will be very, very quiet to-day. We will say nothing to papa about our quarrel," with a forced laugh. "Jeff shall bring a cup of hot, strong coffee to your room as soon as it can be made."

"Don't trouble about me, Elsie; I am not going to be ill at all; it is you who are exposing yourself. Yes, we will hasten in. After I had said what I did to Miss St. John, last evening, I was told something about her which surprised and pained me. My mind is unsettled—confused. I am not quite at ease."

"But—we are friends?" she asked, clinging to his arm as they walked back to the house.

"Yes, I hope so, Elsie; it would have distressed me to go from here feeling that you and your father were my enemies."

"It would have killed me," said the girl, under her breath.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE LANE.

Oh, that cursed villain!

He will not let me be the man I would.

—BAILIE.

"I MUST take a ride over my plantation this morning if you will excuse me for a couple of hours, Chayce."

Mr. Laselle had not been in brilliant spirits during breakfast. On the contrary, so moody and taciturn had been his demeanor that his guest might have supposed Elsie had made a confidant of her father had she not assured him differently in the garden; while Aubrey, himself, was so absorbed in bitter doubts as to be scarcely aware of his friend's silence. Madame Laselle was not at table; Elsie had taken a sudden flight from the deepest despondency to actual radiance of spirits; and she it was who had kept the ball of conversation pirouetting in a dazzling fountain of rainbow nonsense—something in Aubrey's last words in the garden had worked this marvelous transformation: "He must—he shall—love me yet!" kept bubbling and singing in her wayward heart—

"I have been mistaken in my feeling for Miss St. John"—these were the magic words that repeated themselves over and over to her.

"Certainly, Mr. Laselle. I shall not feel that I truly have the freedom of your house unless you treat me as a member of the family by going on with your pursuits as usual," yet Aubrey wondered why he was not invited to ride with his host—he would have enjoyed a canter over the fine plantation; and—he dreaded, if the truth must be told, a long tête-à-tête with Miss Elsie Laselle, dazzlingly-joyous as she now chose to be.

Julien Laselle set off alone, however, on horseback, after enjoining his daughter to take good care of their friend; as he rode away he was musing:

"Perhaps he will speak to her of marriage while I am absent. I hope and pray he may! Her future—my darling's!—were settled beyond a peradventure—if she were Aubrey Chayce's wife—I should not so much fear 'the lings and arrows of outrageous fortune.'"

He walked his animal slowly along a by-road bordered with lovely hedges of blooming Cherokee roses; his brows were drawn in a scowl of troubled thought over his keen, flashing eyes.

"Here he comes now! The very man I was riding to meet! *Mon Dieu*, if only I were certain! At times—I am certain. Then again I feel that I am a fool to suspect such a thing—this is not the age of miracles."

As the two riders met in the narrow lane they reined in their horses and touched the brims of their broad Panama hats. Each looked straight in the other's eyes with a sharp, inquiring look.

"Have you business with me, sir? I see you were coming to my house?"

"Yes, Julien Laselle, I was coming to your house on business. We can talk as well here as anywhere, however. Claire Laselle has employed me as her agent. I am authorized by her to make with you such a settlement of her claims as I think just and right. Have you any proposition to make?"

"Why should I make a proposition?" sneered Laselle. "That had better come from the lady. It is she who is playing the game of black-mail."

The bronzed face of the other man paled a little—his eyes shot forth a steely gleam; but he spoke with perfect calmness.

"Then, if I am to arrange the matter for her my terms are these: half of the money and estates left by the uncle in Cuba to Victor and Julien Laselle, or their heirs, conjointly, with interest from the date of your taking possession of the property, and the refunding of one-half of the moneys used, or profits made on said property."

"I refuse, utterly. Such an arrangement would about ruin me. Why should I make it? I dispute the validity of the girl's claim; she was born out of wedlock, consequently is not my brother's legal heir."

"You are a strange man," said Rex, in a peculiar tone, with a scornful smile. "A very strange man! I did not think it was in the Laselle blood to become such a scoundrel."

The haughty Southerner raised his riding-whip as if to bring it down on his insulter's head, but thought better of it and let it fall again to his side.

"I will now make my proposition," he said, "which you can take to this young and pretty adventuress. Twenty thousand dollars in cash and registered U. S. bonds, to be paid to her by me, after she has sworn that such sum will satisfy all claims, and that I shall never hear from her again in any way. It's a devilish big sum to pay for black-mail; but, to get rid of her and her ridiculous claim to the name of Laselle, I will give it."

"Very well. We refuse the offer. And tomorrow I go to New Orleans to place the case in the hands of some competent lawyer."

"Go ahead, and the deuce take you!" hissed the planter, setting his teeth. "The girl will lose the comfortable sum I have offered her and gain—nothing. You will find it deuced hard to get a Louisianian jury to bring in a verdict against Julien Laselle! Ay, even if the girl proved her mother's marriage! And that," he added, with a cool smile, "I have taken good care to make impossible."

"By treachery and theft, most noble of the Laselles!"

"Have it so, if you will. The opinion of a man in your position is not of much importance to me. Are you aware that the minister who was said to have married my brother to the opera-singer has been dead these three months?—that all letters are destroyed, along with the forged certificate? That there is absolutely nothing on which to found your case but the impression remaining on the mind of this girl—whose mother died when she was less than two years of age—that Colonel Victor Laselle was her father?"

"How about the diamond cross, with the inscription?"

"Which you stole from my desk? I do not care that for it," snapping his fingers.

"Supposing Victor Laselle were alive?"

Rex put this strange suggestion forth with apparent carelessness, looking with a smile full in the other's face.

"An idiotic supposition!" burst from the planter's white, trembling lips after an instant's silence. "Alive? He was a two days' corpse when Pierre and I found him there under that oak. Alive! None but Christ could perform that miracle! And, if alive, why hide the fact from his only brother? Why give no sign or token all these eighteen years? Why make no claim to the splendid inheritance falling to both of us? You talk like a fool."

"I did not say that he was alive; I said, 'Supposing he were?'"

"I do not suppose it. I was fond of my brother when we were boys together. He died—and I grieved for him, long and sincerely. But, I do not say that I wish him back now—that would be folly! He would be changed, as I am; we would be as strangers—time and distance would have wrought an alienation which could but make our meeting painful and awkward. Let the dead rest in peace. My brother is dead; he would still be dead to me, even should some strange train of possibilities make it a fact that he were alive. This girl—the fruit of his youthful sins and follies—is nothing to me. And you—you! whoever you are, who seek to interfere with my life-long plans and position—

are nothing to me! Go to law, if you wish; I defy you."

Rex studied the quivering, pallid, haughty face, whose dry lips and burning eyes expressed a sort of defiant anger—studied it with a curious scrutiny, as if reading a new page in the book of human nature, for half a moment; touched his hat, wheeled his horse about, and rode away, merely saying indifferently:

"If you change your mind before to-morrow, Mr. Laselle, let me know."

"Change my mind!" muttered the planter, as the other rode away out of hearing. "*Mon Dieu!* He foresees that I will be compelled to. Ay! I know him now, to a certainty! He has betrayed himself. He is alive, and I am in his power! The game I have played for eighteen years is up. Poor Elsie! poor little proud daughter of a disgraced and plebeian father! A Laselle, of Louisiana! Poor little Elsie! what a crushing blow is in store for that intolerant pride of yours! Yet he offered me a generous compromise. What is half of all I possess—ay, two-thirds, as interest and profit will make it—to utter ruin! He knows well that he will hear from me before night. Ten thousand demons! what is that stirring in the hedge? Has our interview been overheard?"

A stirring behind the Cherokee roses, a shaking of the branches not four feet from his horse, made the spirited animal shy; and when Laselle, with a keen look in that direction, saw the hand and then the head of a colored man appear behind the barrier, quick as a flash his revolver was out of his pocket and pointed straight at the object.

"Spy and listener," he thundered. "What are you doing there, you black rascal, instead of being about your work? I'll give short shrift to such niggers as you!"

"Don't shoot, mastah," said a familiar voice, hastily. "Don't you know me?"

"Pierre!" exclaimed the planter, dropping the muzzle of his weapon.

"Yes, mastah. I come up on a boat last night. I was makin' my way along to Belle-Rivière w'en I seen you comin' on your black hoss, an' then I saw him a-comin', too, an' I dropped jus' where I was an' lay low; 'coz he'd kill me on sight if he knew I had come back. I didn't mean to listen, mastah."

"I hope you heard every word that was spoken, Pierre! I never was so glad to see any one as I am to see you again. Two heads are better than one, my boy; and we have some hard thinking to do to-day."

"I done a heap of thinking behind the hedge there, mastah. If Mastah Rex, as he calls himself, goes down to New Orleans, he mus' never come back again. That's my idea, mastah."

"Who will prevent his return, Pierre?"

"I will—if mastah gives me cart-blank to do it."

CHAPTER XXII.

SUDDEN AND STRANGE.

"Why comes he not?" she said:

She said, "I am weary, weary—
Would God that I were dead!"

—TENNYSON.

THE house on the plantation which Rex had purchased for Mrs. St. John was not so large as the Laselle residence, nor were the grounds anything like as fine; but the place answered their purpose for the two or three months in the year which would be all they would occupy them.

On the afternoon of the same day in which Rex had met their neighbor in the lane, Claire sat by a window of the long, low, cool parlor—simply furnished with matting and sofas of cane—waiting and watching. It was getting late; she was growing anxious; for she had not yet seen Mr. Chayce since he had whispered to her as she left the festival the night before, that he should not sleep under the Laselle roof, but would try to see her early; and she, with Mrs. St. John's permission, had invited him to breakfast. That he had not come at all surprised her.

The day had not passed without her confiding to Mrs. St. John her great and unexpected happiness—

"Not unexpected to me, love," the sweet-voiced lady had interrupted her, with an affectionate smile. "I have seen how matters were going, from the first. My darling, he is all I could ask for you, and I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. The best wish I can possibly wish you is—that you may be as happy as I have been with my husband!"

"Have you been so very happy, Isabel?"

"Happier than my girlish dreams ever painted."

"It is strange—pardon me, Isabel, but I have often wondered how Mr. St. John could remain away from you and the darling children so many, many weeks."

"Business, love—important business," answered Madame St. John, with a merry laugh; then, with an air of mystery:

"He is coming very soon indeed, now. I promise you, if nothing untoward happens, that you shall see him within a fortnight."

"Do you know," murmured Claire, looking timidly at her friend, "I am terribly afraid of him! Supposing he should be displeased at finding an intruder in his family?—that he should take a dislike to me?"

Mrs. St. John looked teasingly at the lovely girl—what an exquisite picture she made, framed in by the rose-wreathed casement!"

"In that case Mr. Chayce will have to take you away immediately," she said, with a delicious laugh. Claire blushed till the lily glowed like a rose.

"I should not like for him to be obliged to take me before he wanted me," she almost whispered; then, a moment afterward—"Isabel, I feel so differently to the ladies since last night! If I were certain that Mr. Chayce would not care—would like me as well without money as with—I would never claim a dollar from my uncle. It would make me very unhappy to pain or embarrass my cousin Elsie in any way. I love her. I know my uncle has acted cruelly and wickedly to me; but I love Elsie, and I am anxious to drop the whole matter—if only I could be certain Mr. Chayce would not be vexed. You know he believes I am your daughter—which is very absurd, considering that you are only thirty, Isabel!—I have to confess to him who I am, before he speaks another word to me about—about what he did last night. Isabel, it makes me tremble! Ah, what if he should be angry—should accuse me of having cheated him! If I had dreamed of what would happen! but I did not. I only did it to please Rex, not to deceive Mr. Chayce."

"If his love does not stand the test, you will make a happy escape in learning its worth so early. Do not disturb yourself, Claire—Aubrey Chayce, if he loves you, is not the man to care whether you come clad in silks and jewels, or like the beggar maid to the King Cophetua. And then, darling, I shall see that you have a befitting trousseau, and a wedding-portion, too."

"I cannot imagine what makes you so good to me," said Little Claire, with a loving look at the beautiful woman on the sofa.

Mrs. St. John had read Aubrey correctly when she said that mere money would have no weight with him in his choice of a wife; but birth, family, position, prestige—ah! in these things his pride was indomitable. We cannot guess how deep was the wound when Laselle revealed to him the identity of the lily-maid with that singing adventuress!—how bitter the humiliation! He was a man of the world, and he could not believe that absolute truth and purity and sweetest virgin innocence, such as must belong to Caesar's wife, could have remained in the heart and soul of a girl who had had such an experience. He did not know that little Claire had been reared by holy nuns in almost angelic innocence—that, during her few months of stage experience she had wrapped herself in a cloud of reserve, living with, and yet apart from her companions. No! everything witnessed against the poor girl in his mind. He was just in the mood to make the worst of the insinuations thrown out by Laselle. The misery he felt convinced him of the terrible strength of his love. Good or bad, fair or foul, innocent or guilty, this girl had crept into every fiber of his being, until it would be like wrenching his soul from his body to tear her out of his life.

While Claire, lovely as a dream, in her soft, white dress, with white roses in her hair, and a new light in her sweet, deep eyes, sits by the casement, looking out on a world of vivid bloom, and anxiously watching, let us see what is happening to the lover for whom she waits.

It has been a strange day at Belle-Rivière. When the master rode away on his errand, Elsie and Aubrey were left alone to entertain each other. Madame Laselle was quite unwell that morning, Phyllis reported, having over-exerted herself at the party. Elsie ran up, after breakfast, to take her some fresh flowers, and to give her a morning kiss; but she did not remain long in her mother's chamber; she was very fond of her dear mamma, but Aubrey was at the piano, down below, and she was eager to be with him.

"Well, Elsie, you looked beautiful in the peach-bloom satin, last night," murmured the pale invalid, faintly, smiling at her restless daughter. "Did he say anything particular about—"

"No, no, mamma," the girl quickly interrupted her, with a blush that dyed her warm, brown skin a vivid scarlet.

"There was not much opportunity. Perhaps he will find a better one to-day. There, there, go!—I see you are fretting to be away—go to him, Elsie, and be happy. Phyllis is all I need."

So Elsie kissed her pale mother again and went, gladly.

Aubrey looked up at her with surprise and admiration as she came back into the breezy, rose-scented drawing-room, her great black eyes a blaze of diamond light, her cheeks red with burning bloom. With that passionate tropical nature to love was to love entirely, with a mixture of jealousy and hate for all who interfered in the slightest. There was no conscience in Elsie's love—only a determination to win or die defeated. She set herself to work to charm this man she adored, not consciously but instinctively, by being her prettiest, her most willful, most perverse, most attractive, most

childish, most womanly—varying in her moods like the chameleon in color—and brilliant in all her phases. She made him laugh and frown—she vexed and flattered him. She led him a will-o'-the-wisp chase through the airy suit of rooms opening one into another—out the window—through the lemon-grove—into the cypress bower, where her hammock swung:

"laughing, and looking back"

one moment, the next she flung herself down on a bench under the gloomy, moss-veiled trees and burst into a passion of tears.

"What is the matter, Elsie?" asked Aubrey, with some tenderness.

"I dare say I am tired. It is stupid, being up all night."

"Why don't you take a siesta? I will go away and leave you in—"

"No, no! I shall cry harder than ever if you go away."

"It distresses me to see you in tears."

"Then I will dry them," she said, with a little touching sob.

And all this time Aubrey was debating what he should say and do when he went over to Mrs. St. John's in the afternoon. Elsie knew it and accused him of it.

"You don't care if I cry my eyes out! You are only thinking of her!"

"I am thinking of her," he answered gravely.

But something more serious even than this battle of hearts was transpiring at Belle-Rivière. While Elsie was pulling a lapful of flowers spitefully to pieces, and Aubrey was standing gloomily before her, staring into the distance, not at her witching face, Phyllis came running out to them, wringing her hands.

"Does you know where master's gone, honey?"

"Over the plantation somewhere," the girl answered, carelessly.

But Chayce saw there was something going wrong.

"What is the matter, Phyllis?"

"It's the madame—she's done gone an' had an under dose dre'dful hemorrhages! de wust I ever seen! I done send for the doctor, right away; an' I wish to de Lord I knew where master was."

Elsie, starting up with a scream, was making off when Aubrey caught her, soothed her, begged her to quiet herself before she went in where her mother was.

"Your agitation may be fatal to her. Remain here, until the doctor gives you permission to go in the room. You can do nothing. I know something of this sort of illness; I will see what can be done until the physician arrives."

Half an hour later he came from the sick-chamber looking very grave. He wrung in silence the hand of Laselle who had just arrived—the doctor had been there some ten minutes; Elsie was allowed to go up-stairs with her father.

Hours passed away—long hours which Aubrey would never forget so long as he had a memory—not because of the lady lying in yonder chamber desperately ill, but because of the contest going on in his heart. He spent those hours pacing the garden walks or flung upon the moss under the aged cypresses; the hot midday sun blazed down on motionless foliage and bright wide-open flowers.

"I love her! I love her! Great Heaven, how I love her! If I knew she were as bold and artful as she seems the opposite I should still love her. It is too late to tear her out of my heart. But, to make her my wife—that is another thing! I can fly from her. I can prove the manliness of my courage by flight," he laughed, in self-scorn. "I can write to her, and telling her what I have learned, can bid her farewell forever."

A shadow fell on the bright white path before him as he lay under a moss-wreathed cypress; he looked up and saw Phyllis.

"My missus is dyin'," she said, with a choked voice. "The priest is with her to 'minister de sacraments. She would like to bid you good-by, too, she says; she berry fond of you, I know."

Aubrey, ashamed of his own trouble, arose and silently followed the maid to the house and up to the chamber of death. He was pale and grave as he went softly into the pleasant room whose mistress lay motionless on her pillows, looking eagerly for him to come. The husband, daughter, the priest, himself, Phyllis, the faithful maid, composed the group around the bed.

"I had not thought to die so soon," whispered Madame Laselle, "but the doctor says I have an hour to live. I had hoped to live to see my darling a happy wife. Aubrey—if you and Elsie are going to be married—some time—why not now? I should be—more content. A mother is always anxious."

If Aubrey was pale and grave before, he was paler and graver now. How strange that all this family took it for granted that he was to marry Elsie Laselle! How astounding this unexpected proposition from the blue cold lips of a dying mother! He looked slowly about him. The keen, tearless eyes of Julien Laselle were fixed upon him inquiringly. The priest seemed anxious for the decision to be quickly made.

"If I dare not marry the only girl I shall ever love and this other girl loves me, why not end it in this fashion?" he asked himself.

"I want to see you—happy—before I die."

Aubrey's brain was like a mass of fire—his body cold as ice. He glanced over at Elsie, who was clinging to her father's hand. Their eyes met—oh, what love, what passion, what piteous entreaty he read in those beautiful eyes! How cruel it would be to tell the dying lady he had no thought of wedding her daughter! What a strange, bewildering dilemma! How embarrassing to him!

Some words struggled to his trembling lips:

"I have never asked your daughter if she would marry me."

"She loves you dearly, Aubrey—my son."

"Oh, mamma, mamma," murmured Elsie.

"Are you willing to join your fate with mine, Elsie—knowing all?"

The faint murmur of her voice just reached him.

"If you will take me—yes."

"Hasten, father!—it was the voice of the sinking woman grown strangely clear and strong; the flame of life was flashing up for a last moment before utterly expiring.

Aubrey reached out an icy hand and Elsie came to his side.

The priest gave to the lips of the two the consecrated water, and rapidly muttered the prayers. Madame Laselle made a motion that the glorious diamond circlet should be removed from her own fourth finger and used for the bride. As this was being done a thought of his ruby ring and the white bosom on which it had quenched its vivid fires, flashed through Aubrey's brain:

"My God, do I not know she—and she only—is my mate?"

"I am doing a wicked thing," he said to himself. "Too late for repentance," he added, his hand groping in thick darkness, so that he found it impossible to follow the words which were binding him to an unloved bride.

CHAPTER XXII.

A TIGER AMID THE ROSES.

"All will be done which now the gods foresee."

"Oh, this anguish seems to crush"

All my life out—body and mind."

"If it were not for his wife and daughter, I would show the scoundrel no mercy, for he merits none," thought Rex, as he rode along, not directly home, but out onto the main road and on into the town on some errands connected with Madame St. John's plantation. "Why should I play this game of shilly-shally any longer? Why trouble to go to New Orleans? It requires the services of no lawyer to straighten out our affairs! I have but to make a certain revelation, and he will be only too glad to compromise on any terms. I am putting myself to a great deal of unnecessary inconvenience. I think the principal object I had in this delay is already accomplished! Ay, and the secondary object, too! Aubrey Chayce loves little Claire—he has told her so. And little Claire is very fond of her faithful friend and adviser, Rex. Everything is in train for the grand denouement. Very well; to-morrow we shall have it."

He rode on, well pleased, his dark, thin face, lighted up by smiling thoughts of little Claire and her lover. If Rex had had the world to choose from he would have preferred for the husband of his protégée no man to Aubrey Chayce. All Rex's anticipations were delightful, on that fair spring day. The plans of a long and troublesome year were drawing to a successful close.

Any reluctance or remorse he may have felt at the disaster he was obliged to bring down on that lovely home of the Belle-Rivière had vanished at last under the certainty of Laselle's heartless selfishness. He was sorry for madame—sorry for that proud, willful, handsome young daughter, and secretly resolved to make them whatever amend was in his power. As to the man, he deserved his suffering—let him suffer.

It was late in the afternoon when he returned from Baton Rouge; he had dined there at a hotel. The dew was falling, the birds twittering sleepily, a thousand sweet perfumes were making the air heavy, when he entered the old-fashioned dining-room of the cottage, where tea was laid on a round table drawn close to an open window, garlanded with jessamine, through which stole a flood of pale gold from the western sunset.

"Oh, you have come at last, Rex!" said Madame St. John, beautiful in white grenadine, with red roses in her hair; and she looked at him in a way which ought to have made the absent master of her heart look out for his rights in the love-glances of those warm, dark eyes. "Then we will have tea this minute."

"Where is Aubrey?" asked Rex, looking over at Claire, who was standing by another western window. "I expected to have the pleasure of his company at tea."

Claire was pale and her voice trembled despite of her efforts to steady it:

"He has not been here to-day; I do not understand it."

Rex frowned and gnawed at his under lip.

"Not been here?" he said, presently. "That is very strange."

"Don't tell her so, Rex; she feels it too much already," murmured madame, in an aside. "Come child, let us have our tea," aloud, and cheerfully. "A hundred things may have happened to delay his visit. The Laselles may have had a houseful of company and kept him against his will. He certainly will come this evening."

Madame rung, and a neat colored woman brought in boiling water in a little silver kettle. The lady made the tea, and very choice and fragrant it was. The three sat around the pleasant table, charming with fragrant scarlet berries and snowy curds and a great plate of roses and carnations which gave a dainty air to the more material accessories of the feast.

Claire was comforted by what Mrs. St. John had suggested, and drank her tea and partook of her strawberries with an appetite. Rex could not keep his eyes from her face; it had changed since yesterday; something new had come into it, making it a thousand times lovelier than before—the rosy inward light that shines through a girl's face when

she has first been told that she is loved—a rose, with the sun behind it.

He did not tease her with it, although he observed how, every moment, the sweet eyes stole a look through the window up the lane.

He said nothing about a trip to New Orleans, for he had no intention of taking one; but chatted away in excellent spirits, not only to divert Claire, but because he felt lighter-hearted than he had in many a long month. Idleness and suspense were to give place to decisive action on the morrow.

Deep twilight fell; a large yellow moon arose out of the warm mist and sailed up into the sky; the three went out on the porch to enjoy the cool air and to watch for Aubrey Chayce.

There fell a silvery-silken veil of light,
With quietude, and sultriness, and slumber,
Upon the upturned faces of a thousand
Roses that grew in an enchanted garden;

a nightingale sent forth bubbling notes from a thicket of azaleas—it was a night for lovers—but the dim, sweet hours crept slowly by, bringing no eager, impatient suitor to the side of little Claire.

"It is passing strange," murmured madame, vexed and uneasy.

"Of all Aubrey's good qualities I most admire his manliness—his fearless truthfulness," remarked Rex. "Can it be possible that he, of all men, will play the craven?"

"No, no, Rex, dear Rex!" cried Claire, quickly. "Something has gone wrong; but, whatever it is, he is not in fault! Do not blame him until you know."

"You are like other girls—you defend your lover at all hazards," laughed Mrs. St. John, as she kissed her and went off to bed.

Pretty soon Claire, also, went away to her jasmine-scented chamber. Her head had begun to ache, her heart was heavy; she threw herself down on the little white bed and pressed her hot brow in the pillows.

"I know what is the matter," she said to herself.

"Some one has recognized me, told him who I am—and his love has not been equal to the test. His pride has mastered his love. I felt, all the time, that it would be so, even when I yielded to the mad sweetness of believing him for one brief hour! If I could have told him—could have proved to him that I had no intention of deceiving him as to my past life—could have shown him my heart, pure as when my mother kissed my baby lips—and all, all his!—perhaps he might still have prized me."

It was a night of bitter, sleepless grief to the poor girl.

Rex, meantime, having many things to arrange in his mind, sat a long time alone on the porch. The moon had climbed to the zenith, flinging a dense shadow of vines over the cane-seat sofa on which he was stretched, buried in thought. Profound silence reigned.

The servants had long ago retired to their quarters; none of them slept in the house except madame's maid and Rex's man. The cook and her husband had a shake-down bed in the kitchen which stood not far from the main cottage; the other cabins were huddled together down a lane, the eighth of a mile away.

Something in the garden which was not the wind had been moving the foliage and making mysterious shadows for over an hour; but this silent phenomenon had occurred out of the range of Rex's vision.

Behind rose-bushes, along jasmine trellises, behind rows of oleanders, a crouching figure had crept—halted—crept on again—noiseless and stealthy. Now it stands erect for an instant in the center of a group of glossy-leaved magnolias, and the silver moonlight falls full on the face of a mulatto—Pierre. His eyes gleam—and so does the long, thin knife he clutches. He knows that Rex is sitting alone in the shadow of the vines in the porch; for he has played the spy since early evening.

"I have let him go to the end of the rope," muses the man on the porch. "I have let him play that he was free to dictate; for, while I dallied with him, I was winning little Claire's affection and trust; and I was learning what sort of a man he was to whom she had given her heart. Now, I am ready to checkmate. To-morrow I close the game."

And out in the dusky shadows of the wild, untrained garden the mulatto is muttering to himself:

"If I murder him it is not dat I have spite ag'en him; I use to think a heap of him—an' I neber yet have quite done gone killed anybody; but if I must to save my mastah—I must! Nobuddy sha'n't neber say, 'Missa Elfie, she not de heirst—she nobuddy tall.' To save young missa an' mastah I would do a heap wicked things. I stab de enemy—who knows who did it? Not a soul done guess I dis side de water. Mastah could not do it, 'cause he home in bed. I lay low for a few weeks—who guess Pierre did it? They will say, 'Some dem pore black niggers did it—plantation trash—they murder de mastah an' rob de house.'"

Thus, in the hour of the mysterious guardian's triumph, while he planned the downfall of the usurper, the stealthy spy crept closer and closer, until his gleaming eyes were shining through the starry jessamine vines he had cautiously parted to look in upon his intended victim.

Rex sat there as motionless as if asleep, his eyes closed—though that the murderer was unaware of, since he was looking from the end of the porch at the top of the head of the reclining man.

The stillness was quite too profound; the would-be assassin wished, with all his heart, that some freakish breeze were blowing, to rustle the leaves and rattle the windows, and so cover any slight sound he might make in his cat-like advance. He could not force his way through the web of vines

without some noise; he could not approach from the front without being seen; but the hall doors were open, front and rear, and by creeping around to the back he could enter, gain the dining-room and reach his victim from the window which was wide open directly over him.

To do this was the work of three or four minutes.

How many lives hang on a thread not half so long as that?

To the wretch who would escape the flames by a burning staircase three minutes would be salvation.

While Pierre was creeping about the house and coming in at the rear, Rex opened his eyes very wide, sat up, arose, stretched his arms over his head, yawned, and owned to himself that he was sleepy, and that it was time he was thinking of bed. He walked quickly in his list slippers to the door of the hall; in at the opposite door a flood of moonlight streamed, revealing a dark figure slipping into the dining-room. Rex caught the flash of a knife.

"Some dastardly negro who has come to rob us," he thought.

Whipping out his revolver—with no intention of shooting, but a very decided determination to thoroughly frighten the rascal—he went quickly and silently after him.

The room was quite light, for the moon shone in freely. Some one was leaning out of the window over the settee from which he had just arisen.

As he turned, with a low-muttered oath, back into the room again, Rex saw what manner of knife he carried—and who he was.

"Pierre! What! at your murderous tricks again?"

The mulatto would have leaped from the window.

"Keep perfectly still, or I fire," said Rex, grimly.

"Now, throw that knife away and come here."

There was nothing for Pierre to do but obey—or die. He preferred to obey. Rex marched him out of the house, down the lane, to the negro quarters, where he shouted for aid; and soon his prisoner was securely bound and locked in a sort of guard-house, a cabin which had been used for that purpose with refractory slaves in times gone by. Rex did not leave him until his person had been searched for weapons and he had been handcuffed; after which he was given a mattress, and the key being turned on him, he was left to think over the adventure, while his captor returned to the house, went to bed and slept until late in the morning.

Breakfast was waiting to be served when Rex came down.

The ladies were up and had been out gathering fresh flowers for the table.

"See! what I found on the porch!" said Madame St. John, handing her agent the long, sharp-pointed knife which Pierre had been forced to throw away.

"It looks ugly," with a shudder. "I hope the negroes in this part of the country are peaceable."

"They are, entirely so. I forgot to pick up the knife, madame; I left it there last night."

Reassured, the lady got back her color and sat gayly down to pour the coffee. Both noticed Claire's pale cheeks, but thought best to make no remarks on them.

The fried spring chicken and omelet had been served when the waitress came in with a plate of hot corn cakes. Her eyes were glistening with some great news; the plate came down with a crash, and then she stood, fidgeting, dying to speak.

"What is it, Salie?" asked her mistress, noticing her excitement.

"Oh, missus, such queer news from Belle-Rivière!" All three started and looked anxiously at the girl; the young lady with a face that flushed and paled.

"Oh, missus, would you believe it, Madame Laselle was took dreadful sick yiste'day, an' died befo' sun-set!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. St. John, drawing a long breath and glancing quickly at Claire, as if to say:

"I told you so!"

And Claire! Shocked and sorry as she felt, could she help the wild thrill of joy that ran through every vein at the thought that Aubrey had a good excuse for not coming to see her yesterday? No, the thrill came even before the regretful feeling; yet she was very sorry—for her uncle, for Elsie—tears rose as she thought of her cousin losing her mother with such frightful suddenness.

"Befo' she died," the girl went on, "she said she would like her daughter to be married; so Miss Elsie she was married right dar, by her dying mudder's bedside. Wa'n't det mighty queer?"

"Miss Elsie married?—to whom?" sharply demanded Rex.

"To de young gentleman from New York—Massa Chayce—leastwise, so dey say. I seen Chloe, from over dar—she tol' me it was de Gospel truf. De priest wot come to madame he done performed de ceremony— Oh, Lord, wot a scare de missa give me!" for the cup had fallen from Claire's hand and broken in a hundred fragments on the floor.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WOMAN'S STRENGTH AND MAN'S WEAKNESS.

High noon shone down in unbroken splendor over the neglected but luxuriant garden through which Pierre had crept on his murderous mission the night before. A half-ruined summer-house, in the style of a Grecian temple, gleamed whitely out in the midst of a tangle of climbing, flowering vines, honeysuckle, jessamine, passion-flowers. To this summer-house Claire had fled, as soon as the curious eyes of the servant were off her, from the breakfast-table that morning; and here she had remained for hours, hiding her sufferings, with the same instinct that drives a wounded dove to hide in the thicket. Not even Mrs. St. John, who was longing to soothe and caress her favorite, thought best to intrude on this first anguish, which a girl's pride prompts her to conceal from all.

Claire had a book with her that she might affect

to read if any one came near; but the book had slipped from her lap to the decaying door; her head was bowed on her warm white arm, and her fallen hair had shadowed the pale cheek.

A pressure of footsteps—a man's footsteps—sounded on the walk outside, approached the door, and stopped. Then the person entered and stood by her side. Not doubting but that it was Rex, she looked up slowly, reluctantly, betraying the dark shadows under her eyes, and the pain, the misery in their dim depths.

"Claire! my own little Claire!"

"Mr. Chayce!"—she sprung to her feet, confronting him with a look of surprise, mingled with rising scorn. Involuntarily she stretched out a superb arm as if to wave him back.

"I know you have reason to be angry with me, Claire; yet, do not look at me so! The fear that you were suffering has made me uneasy; I could endure it no longer, and so, stole away, to explain all to you."

"Do not fear that I shall suffer—too long," she answered him, with a sweet, cold voice which pride steadied so that not a tremble softened it:

"Men may have died

And worms have eaten them, but not for love."

Shakspeare says that, Mr. Chayce, and I am of his mind. You will pardon me, if I decline—your pity."

How beautiful, how self-possessed, how haughty the lily girl had grown! The fire in the dark eyes, the little droop of scorn about the perfect mouth, the noble gesture of the head thrown back—there was no lady in the land could have looked more queenly than this poor chorus-singer whom Laselle had dubbed an adventuress.

"Claire, did I come here to offer you my pity? Heaven knows I rather came to ask for yours! Yes, to acknowledge my sin of hesitation—to beg your pardon for my contemptible doubts—to swear to you that they are gone forever. I have been placed in a very strange and embarrassing dilemma; and, if I yielded to the pressure of events, I need your forbearance for an hour's doubt as to what I ought to do."

"You did quite right; I do not blame you."

"A dying mother's appeal—think of that, my own Claire!"

"You do nobly to shelter yourself behind a dead woman, sir! Yet, why do you come here to trouble me with your explanations? I take all things for granted, and absolve you before you confess. I do not deny that I have received a hurt; but, time will heal it."

"How cold, how unapproachable you are! I thought, if you truly loved me, you would forgive my fault, and be kind to me."

She laughed—a bitter-sweet laugh—that stung his pride and made him wince.

"What manner of 'kindness' would you prefer me to show?" she asked, looking up into his blue eyes with her lovely, mocking ones. "Ah, after all, it is as well I should have seen you once more—to give you back your ring."

She drew the burning jewel from its fragrant nest and held it out to him, still with that dazzling, chilling smile.

"Claire, you are angry—and cruel!"

"Not angry—no."

"I did not think to find you so unrelenting."

"It can be nothing to you what I am."

"Claire, little Claire, forgive and forget! Come back to me!" He held out his arms—his blue eyes softened in a winning smile:—oh, heaven, how beautiful he was, the moving shadows of the leaves, the quivering light playing over his golden hair and handsome forehead, his resolute mouth melting into tenderness, the magnetism of his youth and manliness and passion drawing her toward him.

She turned from him; the ring he had refused to take fell at his feet and lay there sparkling like a drop of fire.

"Claire, am I to understand that we are not even to be friends?"

She made him no answer; it seemed as if her patience were wearing out.

"Will you not say good-by?"

She gathered up her book from the floor and sat down with her face turned from him.

"Good-by, then—forever!"

She heard his rapid, heavy steps on the gravel as he went away. Her heart seemed drawn out of her body to follow them as they died away, but she clenched her little white teeth together and sat still.

"It was cowardly of him to come here—it was wicked," she panted, as the last echo ceased. "It was unmanly!"

She looked slowly around with woeful eyes; the ring still lay where it had fallen, glowing and scintillating under the touch of a sunbeam that slid through the leafy roof; a moment's hesitation—and she had taken it up, kissed it passionately, and threaded it again on the slender gold chain she wore about her neck.

"It will not hurt her for me to keep the ring," she murmured. "She will not know it—and she has him. Oh, Aubrey Chayce, I cannot hate—I cannot scorn you! I only play that I do. I can hardly even blame you. Doubtless, you thought you fancied the pale quiet girl—the 'lily maid,' as you called her—until this warmer, brighter, more animated, more bewitching cousin of mine betrayed her heart to you. They all wanted you—father, mother, daughter! You yielded to wealth, beauty and flattery. I do not blame you. I did not half-believe in my own happiness even when you held me in your arms. I am too grave for a man of fashion and brilliant position. Elsie is the wife to mate your fortunes. Fate has smiled on her from her cradle, even as it has frowned on poor little Claire. Everything is over for

me—love, hope, ambition. Oh, how sad it is; but I must be patient and bear it."

The gay, high-pitched voices of children rung through the garden; in a few moments two dark little heads were thrust into the summer-house, two pairs of brilliant eyes looked curiously at their young lady friend.

"Where have you been all the morning, Miss Claire? We have wanted you ever so much! We have swung mamma in the hammock until she is tired; may we swing you?"

"No, Dudu, darling, not now; but we will have a singing lesson. What do you say to that? Come, and learn 'Little Buttercup.'"

Bravely Claire locked her sorrow tight in her own bosom. By the time the little family met at dinner, she was outwardly serene. She had taken a resolve, however, which even sharp-sighted Rex did not suspect.

The death at Belle-Rivière necessitated the postponement of his interview with its master until after the funeral; so Rex remained quietly at home, saying nothing to the ladies of the prisoner he still held in the guard-house, and waiting for events to move on—a bitterly disappointed man, however. This marriage at Belle-Rivière took the brightness from his hour of anticipated triumph. It was Claire's happiness for which he had been steadfastly working—and now how poor would the prize of wealth show in her eyes, having lost the man she loved!

It was a vexing, wretched day for Rex—doomed to be followed by another still darker. For, when they came to breakfast the next morning, the maid brought them word that Missa Claire had not slept in her bed, and was gone, and here was a note was pinned to her pillow. It was directed to Rex, and said:

"DEAR, DARLING OLD REX: Forgive me, and do not worry about me. I am going back on the stage—it is all I have to live for. I must do something, or go mad. I will write soon to Mrs. St. John. "CLAIRE."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SCOUNDREL UNMASKED.

THE funeral had taken place. The wealth and fashion of the parish, who had flocked to Belle-Rivière to a scene of gayety and festival not a week before, came again to these solemn services. The poor lady—at rest after years of restlessness—was laid in her grave in a quiet spot sacred to the memory of many Laselles, where roses bloomed and cypresses waved their mourning vails of moss over gleaming marbles.

Friends had come and gone; the dews of the first night had fallen over the grave; the house had settled down to that dull repose which follows the sad excitement of such a time. It was noon of the day following the funeral. Julien Laselle sat at his desk in his library looking over some papers. Every few moments he jumped up and walked about the room. His dark, bright eyes were very restless, his air nervous. No doubt he grieved somewhat after the wife he had married for her money and had never loved, since there is an attachment that springs from habit and association which almost simulates true affection.

But it was not madame's loss which filled his mind entirely. He knew the danger which hung over him. He was troubled because he had heard or seen nothing of Pierre since that unexpected meeting in the lane. He did not know whether Rex had gone to New Orleans—he did not know whether Pierre had followed him. He *did* know that long years of splendid prosperity were drawing to a sudden, shameful close—unless something happened to this man who threatened him! Did he want Pierre to contrive to have that something happen? He did not know. In his present mood it seemed to him he hardly cared which went down—himself or that other man. But this was a mood which would not last long.

Suddenly, as he bent over his papers, he felt the presence of some one in the room, and turned pale as he looked up. Rex had come in and closed the door. He now advanced and drew a chair up near the window, laying his revolver on the sill. Julien drew out his revolver, at this movement, and laid it beside him on the desk.

"I have your valet—whom you sent over to my house on a singular errand—safely locked up in my guard-house."

"I did not send him, upon my honor! I have been wondering what had become of him."

"Well, he is there. I think you and I can settle our affairs between ourselves."

"I hope so."

"I desire to recall to your mind a few events in the history of our younger days. When Julien Laselle was a youth, in college, he had for his chum another Southerner by the name of Louis Vaudrey. They were very intimate friends, although Vaudrey was poor, and Julien's father, at that time, wealthy. Louis had once been rich; but having inherited his estates when a mere child, had squandered them with reckless speed, and now, at school, had nothing left but one single slave, his personal attendant, whom he retained not so much out of affection for the young fellow as from the selfish need of his services. An uncle paid his way through college. Meantime, the civil war was raging. Patriotic Southerners, like Julien's father, were giving all they had to the cause. Victor, the older brother, had joined the army, and been made a colonel.

As soon as he left school Julien also followed suit and became aide-de-camp to his brother. They rode side by side for nearly a year; then, in the awful battles of the Wilderness, Julien was shot down and left where he fell for many hours afterward.

"Was it not Victor who was killed?" asked his listener, his shifting, restless eyes glancing away before the speaker's could meet them.

"So it was reported and so published and believed; but that was a mistake; it was Julien Laselle who was killed."

"Why, then, did Victor never declare himself—never return home to claim his estates and announce that he was alive?"

"I will tell you. The winter before the war broke out he had married, indiscreetly and secretly, an opera-singer. Meantime his father had died, his estates been neglected, his slaves freed, his income dwindled to nothing. It seemed to him that his whole life had been a mistake; and when he saw, also, that the South must be defeated, despair of the future seized him. 'If he lived at all,' he said to himself, 'he must begin anew.' He went back the night after Julien was killed, to find his body, and did find it. The face was very much disfigured; and this helped him to an idea. He took the papers from his own pockets and put them in his brother's; he tore off his colonel's uniform, and, removing Julien's coat, replaced it with his own; in the midst of his work he saw a lantern and men approaching, and to escape being thwarted in his new idea, he climbed into the thick branches of the oak under which the body lay and hid there. Imagine his surprise when two men, stopping beside the corpse and setting down the lantern near by, began to talk, and he recognized Louis Vaudrey and his man, Pierre!

"'It was Julien who was killed,' said Vaudrey. 'Look here, Pierre! His brother has tricked him out in his own regimentals! What can that be for? Aha, I think I see! He has given up the cause for lost and he wishes to escape the country! Very good! I admire the plot. Now, Pierre, it would be a good joke to humor him! It will make it all the safer for him should a Julien Laselle arise to take the place of the real one who lies here masquerading against his will, as his brother's corpse. I will be my friend Julien! The resemblance between us, at school, was always commented upon as something remarkable. I don't know, Pierre, that the Laselle estates are worth anything, but the game *may* be worth the candle.'

"Perhaps I need not explain to you," went on Rex, "that Vaudrey was that moment aware that the Laselles had fallen heirs to an immense fortune by the death of an uncle in Cuba. He knew it, for he had just come from Cuba and brought the tidings with him! Well, sir, he was a consummate scoundrel, and he played his game like a gambler, and succeeded."

"Victor did not interfere with him, for he had left the country before news of his inheritance reached him. He went a great distance—to South America—and began life in a new career, nor sought to hear from home; but he contrived to have news privately conveyed to Vaudrey that he was dead."

"He made a fortune in South America—a vast fortune—but it came slowly at first. At the end of three years, when he felt justified in doing so, he was minded to send for his wife. He felt remorse at having deserted her, although he no longer felt for her the mad passion which had hurried the young man of twenty-one into marriage with one older than himself. He employed a trusty messenger to go for her, who returned only with news of her death—and ignorant of the fact that she had left a daughter. After that Victor's prosperity increased; he fell in love with a young and beautiful lady, daughter of a Brazilian merchant, wooed, won her, and has two charming children."

"An undefined rumor, which reached him quite by accident, that he had a child by his first wife living, and being reared in a convent, touched him strangely; he could not rest an hour until he had dispatched me, his trusted agent, to ascertain the truth. Having the name of the convent in Baltimore, I easily learned from the nuns the life of little Claire in their midst, and traced her after she left them. As she had come South with an opera troupe, I followed her. At the same time I gratified my curiosity by taking a peep at Belle-Rivière and its bogus master. Had this false Laselle acted less like a selfish, heartless scoundrel—had he been willing to give a home to the orphan—to share with her what was all hers—I hardly think Victor Laselle would have cared to oust him from the home he occupied so comfortably—for Victor, as I said, is rich enough to afford to laugh at Belle-Rivière. The fact that he set his villainous slave and tool, Pierre, to follow an innocent girl, and take any murderous course his dark cunning suggested, to get rid of her—that he has refused her a name and a portion of his fraudulent gains, has hardened the heart of a man at first disposed to be generous. You will get no mercy now, Louis Vaudrey, from the rightful owner of Belle-Rivière! Luckily for her, your wife is dead. Luckily for her, your daughter's happiness is assured—she has won the protection of a brave and generous gentleman. I am glad that your women do not have to share your punishment. Now, for you, you must leave this parish and this State—must leave it tonight and forever, taking with you nothing but the clothes you wear and money enough to pay your passage to some other land. Either this—or a felon's cell. Victor gives you your choice—which, I think, is showing too much mercy!"

Quick as lightning Vaudrey's hand moved to his revolver, but not more quickly than did Rex's to his weapon. The two men eyed each other. One was pale—deathly pale—and his lips were set in a desperate smile over his gleaming teeth. The other was cool, calm, grave and determined.

"You have made up a devilish strange and incredible story," said Vaudrey, *alias* Laselle. "How can you prove it? Who will credit it?"

"Do you desire to remain in these parts to force me to prove it?"

The other did not answer. He gnawed at the long ends of his mustache with a look in his eyes like that of an animal about to spring.

"If I could shoot you before you had told it to any

other person I would be glad to do it," he said, viciously.

"If you shoot me it will be too late. We have had a third person at our interview. At my request—earnest request—Mr. Chayce seated himself outside the window where he could become my witness in case of need."

An oath broke from the lips of the master of the house.

"I thought it better to choose Mr. Chayce than a stranger. His interest in your daughter will seal his lips until you are gone."

"Interest in my daughter," repeated Vaudrey, moodily. "What interest has Mr. Chayce in my daughter?" with a bitter laugh.

At that moment something moved at the other end of the room. It attracted the attention of both—startled both; they looked anxiously in that direction. A screen stood there between a window and a sofa. Somebody stirred, now, on the sofa, arose and came forth.

It was Elsie, dressed in her somber mourning—Elsie, tall and pale—Elsie, no longer the dazzling, witching, willful child, but with a stern frown on her young face—a dark look in the eyes she fixed upon her father.

"So, papa, it seems I need not have prided myself so much on being a Laselle! I am only the child of a vulgar adventurer, after all! And that—other girl—is all I took credit to myself for being! She is the true Laselle—she is the heiress—she is the one Aubrey loves. And you tried to make me believe he was infatuated with me—you led me on to make unmaidenly advances! I was so vain—so confident that a Laselle must be a fit mate for a prince—that I betrayed all my vanity and pride to him. That is the cruellest pain of the blow to me! Oh, papa, you have crushed me—I can never look in his face again I am afraid—I am afraid, papa, this will make me hate and despise you."

"Don't say that, Elsie! I cannot bear it. I have been a fond father to you. I have given you all the heart I ever had. I have worshiped you—indulged you in every whim. Do not turn against me, like the rest of the world. You are my child." The haughty man who could meet even disgrace with that sort of cool insolence which characterized him seemed to shrink like a sensitive-plant before the cold, scornful look in his daughter's eyes.

"I can't help it, papa. You have ruined my faith in everything. You—you—of whom I have been so proud, to be what you are! Oh, I shall never believe in anybody again. My father—the prince of Southern chivalry—a robber, forger, liar! Yes, papa—and you cannot challenge your daughter to a duel for calling you so—ha, ha, ha! Oh, how pleasant it is to despise one's own father!"

"You are merciless, Elsie," he groaned.

"A chip of the old block," she sneered.

"At least I have loved you. Have you had a wish since you can remember that I have not tried to gratify? Have you not literally:

'Fed on the roses and lain in the lilies of life?'"

"Fit preparation for the future in store for me! Most kind, most provident! I am quite prepared for shame and poverty! Yes, papa, we will go forth together to meet this life for which you have prepared me." For the first time tears rushed into her burning eyes, but she brushed them away with an imperious gesture. "This gentleman says we must go to-night. Very well. If I could beg a dress from one of my servants I would not be beholden to you, sir, for these mourning garments which I must take away with me."

Rex was embarrassed; he spoke very earnestly:

"Not for the world would I have distressed you with this story had I dreamed that you would hear it in its unvarnished truth. I believed that your father would find ways to conceal much of the worst from you; and I could not fear for the prosperous future of the bride of Aubrey Chayce. As Aubrey's wife, your future is secure."

"As Aubrey's wife," she repeated, with a bitter smile. "Do you think he will ever make me his wife—after this?"

"Are you not already married to him? We heard so, at the cottage."

"I came very near it," she answered, still with that mocking smile. "If poor mamma had lived three minutes longer I should have been his wife; but she died in time to save me from that shame. Oh, Mr. Chayce is a very considerate, courteous gentleman—he could not refuse a dying lady's request, but, seeing her dead—he could beg for time!—could suggest the propriety of waiting! No, no, poor fellow, let him thank fortune I am not his wife—nor ever will be. He can wed the lily girl with the proud consciousness that she is the daughter of a gentleman—a Laselle!"

Oh, how bitterly, how almost wildly she spoke! How restlessly her beautiful eyes turned and turned again to the revolver lying on the desk by her father's hand.

"She will do herself harm if she is not watched," thought Rex—his own mind, which had been so calm, was greatly disturbed now; he was astonished to learn that Aubrey was not married after all. His emotions were twofold—keen pity for the proud girl before him, keen joy for Claire's sake. He wanted to make some offer of a home and independence to Elsie which she could accept; he had never meant the blow to fall on her, poor, innocent child!—but he feared that her pride and resentment would urge her to refuse any aid from him. In the midst of his whirl of ideas, while striving after the best way to approach her without offense, a fourth person was added to the group.

Aubrey Chayce, putting his hand on the low window-sill and springing into the room, walked to Elsie's side.

"Little Elsie, my poor pet," he said, very tender—

ly, "If you will marry me, you shall be my wife to-night. And I promise you, by your mother's memory, to try earnestly and honestly to make you a kind, affectionate husband. Come, Elsie, give me the right to save you from sorrow, or shame, or want. Come to my home—I will make it as bright for you as this has been."

He spoke warmly, tenderly—not passionately like a lover—but in a manly, earnest way which showed his sincerity, and Elsie smiled at him with grateful eyes as he took her cold little hand and drew her to his side.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE STAGE.

"And then we met in wrath and wrong,
We met, but only met to part."

"Miss MASON, are you sure you can take the part?"

The manager was in what he called "a stew," and he looked like it—the perspiration stood on his forehead; he was walking up and down the little room with nervous strides. He had attempted to give the fashionables of New York a short season of summer opera before they took flight for seaside and mountain—two weeks early in June, with Alberta as prima donna. Claire was one of this company, and he had not failed to recognize with delight the improvement a year had made in her voice—its strength and its cultivation. It promised great things for the future—indeed, it was a marvel now. Did not Patti sing deliciously the most difficult parts before she was as old as Claire now was?—and oftentimes Mr. Bright said to himself with enthusiasm that Miss Mason was a second Patti!

Very provokingly—with that fatal facility for plunging managers into despair which distinguishes the corps of prima donnas—Alberta had taken a severe cold, become feverish, hoarse, unable to sing, on the very day in the evening of which "Faust" was promised. Prima donnas were scarce at that season of the year; the best of them had taken their flight, "o'er the dark-blue sea." What was to be done?

Mr. Bright thought of Claire; but it appeared folly to suppose she would be familiar enough with the score of Marguerite to give it at a three hours' notice, though she had sung in the inferior parts. However, he would go ask her; and Claire was surprised during the long, warm afternoon, by a call from her employer.

"Are you sure you can take the part?"

"I am not sure that I can do it—justice—not sure but that I shall be too frightened to do even as well as I might; but, as to the music, I know every note of it. All my lessons while I was in Milan, were in the music of Marguerite; I am perfectly familiar with it."

"And you are willing to try?"

"I ought to be glad of the opportunity—I am glad of it—if only I don't get frightened."

"I shall be awfully angry if you fail from nervousness, Miss Mason. You are accustomed to an audience; forget that you are doing anything more than usual, and you will do very well. Come, sing over the music for me."

"I will, part of it, not all, for that would fatigue me too much. I suppose I am to have Alberta's costume?"

"You will need to have a reef or two taken in," said the manager, eying the slender figure. "Go early, and I will have a seamstress there, ready to make necessary alterations. And now, there is no time to lose—let us try the music."

A few hours later a brilliant, if not very large audience was gathered in the opera house to hear the ever-welcome, ever-beautiful "Faust." A rumor had gone abroad that Alberta was ill; the manager had apologized for her, and announced that Mademoiselle Claire Mason would assume her rôle for the evening. Pray, who was Mademoiselle Claire Mason? What disappointment was about to be inflicted on them? They grew a little cross, and the looks bent on the new Marguerite, when she appeared on the village green, were critical, if not contemptuous.

These regards soon grew more curious and then delighted. That fresh, pure voice—the very voice of a young, innocent maiden, glad as a lark's, and soaring to unseen heights as easily, moved every listener with a new emotion—thrilled him to tears. And the singer was like her voice—fresh and lovely as a lily newly-blossomed. Those long braids of hair were all her own—her figure was one of exquisite grace—her face perfectly lovely. What long lashes! What dark eyes! What a sweet, spirited mouth! And how very young—no assumed youth, made up of paint and enamel, but the soft bloom of the very flower!

Claire had come on the stage sternly resolved not to become the victim of stage-fright—not to fail. She threw herself into the very being of Marguerite, forgetting herself, the world, the audience, everything but her part. Her heart scarcely beat a pulse faster until—suddenly her eyes fell on the very stage-box where she had first seen those who had so changed her existence to her, and there, watching her intently, sat a party, the sight of whom then was so unexpected to her as nearly to cause dire disaster to the opera of Faust that night. For an instant her voice trembled—she pressed her hand to her heart—thank Heaven, the curtain was falling, for she felt herself fainting.

It was so sudden! She said, to herself, as some one brought her a glass of water, that if it had not been so sudden she would have borne it well enough—but, to see her, beautiful, bright jewels in her blue-black hair—flowers and jewels in hair and bosom—

"And the folds of her wine-dark violet dress

Glow over the sofa, fall on fall,

As she sits in the air of her loveliness

With a smile for each and for all,"—

to see Elsie sitting there beside Aubrey Chayce, triumphant, happy, sumptuously attired—oh, it was enough to make her faint and falter, coming, as it did, so unexpectedly!

Nor were those two alone. Rex, her friend, was in the box with him; and Mrs. St. John, richly dressed, and attracting admiring glances.

Ah, how lonely, how poor, how humble, little Claire felt—a thing apart from these fortunate people! Even Rex seemed to have passed into a sphere above her. He, too, was richly dressed, with faultless accuracy as to the latest mode; his hair was trimmed, diamonds sparkled at his wrists, on his fingers, and on his bosom; he seemed different from the plain Rex who had been her faithful friend—to have assumed an air of authority, a princely manner, which became him well.

Claire had received a letter from him that morning in which he had said that he should be in New York very soon—that St. John was about to arrive and madame was coming on to meet him and take possession of their beautiful home on the avenue; that he was rejoicing at the prospect of seeing his little friend almost immediately. He had said nothing, however, of Aubrey Chayce and his bride.

During the interval before she again went on the stage Claire struggled for mastery over herself as one struggles in deep waters for life itself; she struggled, prayed—and gained it. She was but a singer, scorned perhaps by the man she loved, for that very thing. He had wealth and power—she was poor and nameless. But she said to herself, over and over:

"Your pride is yet no mate for mine—

Too proud to care from whence I came!"—

and with these words for a talisman she went on, when the time came, supported by an inward strength that was adequate to her great need. Oh, how she sung!—and how she acted!

For Claire was no longer the soft, idle-hearted child of dreams that she had been when we knew her first. She had loved—as natures like hers love but once; she had suffered; her lover had played her false, and her heart was broken. She had not been deceived as poor Marguerite had—no cloud of shame shadowed the whiteness of her innocence—but her heart was broken, and well she knew how to make every one feel it, who listened, spell-bound, to the anguish of her sweet voice, and gazed, fascinated, at her passionate acting. She did not look a second time in the direction of the box where Aubrey sat; but the language of her singing was as plain to him as if those lovely eyes had turned full upon him; he felt the agony that waited in Marguerite's voice; his heart throbbed heavily, painfully; the veins in his temples swelled; there was a hot mist in his eyes—he was scarcely aware of it when the small warm hand of his companion stole into his and gently pressed it.

At last, all was over; the curtain came down on the close of the tragedy; and now, the crowd of fashionables who had been gratified when they anticipated disappointment, made the house resound with the soft clapping of gloved hands and calls for Marguerite.

"Oh, Mr. Bright, do not compel me to appear," pleaded Claire—in vain.

Managers are inexorable when they have their patrons to please. The delighted Bright insisted—and so did the audience—until the tenor took the shrinking hand of the unwilling girl and led her out before the curtain, where bouquets rained at her feet.

For a moment the young *débutante* stood still and deadly pale, making no response to the heart-stirring acclaim—all she thought of was that Aubrey despised her for being a singer—then came back the words she had thought over—

"Your pride is yet no mate for mine,

Too proud to care from whence I came!"—

a sweet rose-color shot up into her cheeks, she smiled charmingly, and pressing one of the bouquets to her bosom, bowed gracefully twice and thrice and was led off in triumph by the smirking tenor.

Mr. Bright had not finished his congratulations when Rex appeared on the scene. Claire shook hands with him cordially, but she did not throw her arms about his neck and give him a kiss, as she once would have done; he seemed changed to her. He was so very elegant that he abashed her; even the manager regarded him with profound respect.

"Come, little Claire," said Rex, in a voice, somewhat husky. "Come home with us. Mrs. St. John is waiting in the carriage outside. We got in town just in time to take hurriedly a cup of tea, change our traveling dress, and hasten to the opera. We left word with the servant to have a *petit souper* prepared for our return. Come, child, you did gloriously to-night; but this work is the last of the kind you will ever do, if I have my way about it."

"Ah, you are not going to take such genius and shut it up—hide such a light under a bushel?" interrupted the manager. "It would be a burning pity!"

Rex took his card from his pocket and gave it to Mr. Bright, saying, pleasantly:

"There is my address. If you will do us the honor to dine with us at six to-morrow we will talk it over."

"It is not for my friend to say, Mr. Bright—my destiny is decided on. I am to be a prima donna," said Claire, with a melancholy smile. "And now, Rex, if I am to go with Mrs. St. John, you must give me time to assume my everyday dress. I will not keep you waiting over five minutes. Are—are—Mr. and Mrs. Chayce to be of the party?"

"No, Claire; we are to have these first hours quite to ourselves. You will see them to-morrow, perhaps."

She gave a sigh of relief as she hastened away to change her attire—to meet Aubrey and his bride to-night, after all she had already endured, would be more of a trial than her strength would support.

In a few moments she was in the carriage, with Mrs. St. John's arms about her, sobbing as if her heart would break; for, after all, our little Claire was no stoic, and at the first kind words of the affectionate lady, the ice of pride in which she had tried to freeze herself melted away. It was hard to live in her little attic chamber alone—it was pleasant to have a woman to care for and pet her.

Rex sat on the front seat, not speaking, for the drive was a short one, and Claire had only just mastered her sobs when the carriage stopped.

They entered the lighted hall; Mrs. St. John's maid was at the foot of the stairs; and greeting mademoiselle respectfully, conducted her to her former room in the elegant house, where she had one of Claire's white dresses and some fresh flowers laid out ready for her young mistress to dress for the little supper which would be ready as soon as mademoiselle went down.

"You need not unbraided my hair, Olla; it will take too much time. I am glad to have this cool muslin dress to slip into. And how sweet these Jacqueminot roses are! Yes, put them in my hair, please. There, now, I am ready—if you think I look nice enough, Olla."

"I think you beautiful, missa," said the colored woman, earnestly.

And so, indeed, she was, beautiful and young and soft and girlish, in the simple white dress with the dark-pink roses in her hair and at her neck and belt.

Claire would not go down until she had stolen one glimpse of the children, asleep in their costly beds in two small rooms opening out of their mother's chamber—wonderful beds of ebony, inlaid with silver, and furnished with pillows of down and quilts of satin.

A servant, black as ink and in a neat livery, ushered the young lady into the library as she came down. Mrs. St. John was a chilly creature, unused to a breath of cold, and although it was the sixth of June, there was a small fire of fragrant wood, over which spices had been scattered, burning in the tiled fireplace, and she sat close by it, looking up with a bright face as Claire slipped like a white spirit into the room.

"Here comes our darling, Rex; and now, let us have supper. I confess to an appetite; for it is midnight—twelve hours since I have had anything but a cup of tea."

They went into the dining-room where the table was laid for three; and then and there the *chef*—imported from Paris to Rio Janeiro, and from Rio Janeiro to New York—sent up a *petite soupe* that was simply perfect, while the sable butler opened a bottle or two of Amontillado which had ripened and thickened in Spanish cellars for more years than lay on the fair head of the girl who "sipped it like a fly."

Madame St. John was excited and chatty; Rex grave and silent, as if something weighed on his mind. Claire found his deep-set, piercing eyes fixed on her with a musing look every time she glanced at him—a look which thrilled and startled her.

She tried to be as gay as her friend Isabel; yet not for one moment could she forget that only the wall of brick between them separated her from Aubrey Chayce and Elsie.

The delicious supper was brought to a close by small cups of black coffee; the trio returned to the library, and then Madame St. John immediately kissed her guest good-night, saying that Rex had a story to tell her, which he had asked leave to tell her alone.

"A story to tell me?" asked Claire, in wonder.

"Yes, Claire," answered Rex, very gravely; "a story that may alter the whole tenor of your life."

He grew more agitated; it appeared as if he dreaded to say what yet he was determined to; Claire felt even more awe than surprise, as she found herself alone, and he drew up a chair—after walking for some moments absently about the room—opposite her at the round table by which she sat, and looked at her earnestly.

"Yes," he repeated, in a low voice, "I have something to say which will surprise you."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE TIME HAS COME."

"What say you, shall we strip him of his honors?"

"The conduct of your uncle Julien has seemed to you strangely base and selfish, Claire. Would you wonder so much at it if you were told that the man whom you have supposed to be your father's brother had not a drop of Laselle blood in his veins!—was, in short, an impostor, personating your uncle—a penniless spendthrift who got possession of money and estates belonging to you, by a bold fraud?"

"That would explain his heartlessness toward me; yet how could such a thing be, Rex? I do not comprehend. If my uncle Julien were alive—and I never have heard of his death—how could another personate him?"

"I don't wonder you ask the question. To answer it I must tell you a long, long story, Claire. I shrink from doing it, for—I fear—I dread—that you may blame and despise your father. Your ideal of him—built up purely out of your own loving fancies—is far nobler, far more worthy than the real man ever was!"

"Stay, Rex!" cried Claire, her indignant eyes kindling. "If you cannot say what you have to say without such a preface as that, you may leave it untold. My father is sacred to me."

He bowed his face in his hands almost with a groan.

"I know you will hate me, Claire," he went on presently. "You cannot even guess how bitter it will be to me to be judged by your pure, just mind; how anxiously, how earnestly I yearn for your respect and affection. But the story must be told—whether you detest me for it, or not—the time has come!"

Then Rex, in low, husky, hurried tones, told the eagerly-listening girl the same story he had gone over to Louis Vaudrey in the library at Belle-Rivière. When Claire heard how it was Julien and not Victor who fell on the field of battle, she gave a sharp cry, rose to her feet, stared across the table at the man who was telling this strange, incredible news to her.

"Then my father did not die?"

"No, child—he lived."

"Is he living now?"

The question came over her pallid lips in an intense whisper; she sunk back in her chair, trembling, but gazing at her companion as if life and death hung on his answer.

"He is, Claire, be calm, listen quietly. Let me go on with what I have still to say."

"Go on, Rex. You have told me enough, though—that my father is alive and has never cared to see his child!"

Again he sighed heavily, and his eyes avoided hers. With an effort he took up the narrative and proceeded; this time dwelling more at length on Victor's reason for quitting his native land—explaining his intention of returning to claim his wife as soon as he could support her in the new country whither he had gone—his sorrow when he learned that she was dead—his ignorance for many years of the existence of his child.

After the first wild rush of surprise Claire listened almost coldly.

"So," she said, slowly, "Mrs. St. John is Mrs. Victor Laselle? She is my father's wife? Her children are my half-brother and half-sister? I think my father takes his time in coming to see his daughter! Oh, Rex, it seems so strange and unnatural! I feel coldly toward this new father. I am afraid of him. I wish it were you were my father, instead of this stranger! I am at home with you; you have been good and kind to me, and I love you."

He looked at her with shining eyes, brushing a tear from his lids.

"Could little Claire really love me?" he asked, with a thrill in his voice.

Claire met his look—something flashed in her own eyes—she pushed back her chair and flew to the other side of the table.

"Rex! Rex!" she cried, "you are my father!"

He held out his arms and she flung herself into them. At first her face was hidden on his shoulder; after a time she bent back her lovely head, gazing at him with tear-wet eyes.

"I want to see if you look any different to me," she said, with a smile.

"Then you do not quite hate me?" anxiously.

"No, Rex—no, my father. It is sweet to be loved and protected."

"Poor child, who have had so little of love and protection. Well, Claire, I am not your hero-father—your brave ideal—but I am very, very fond of you, and I hunger for your affection. It was in the hope of winning it before I declared myself, that I have been so long in bringing about this understanding. I yearned to have your love, something as you loved your dream-father. I wished, also, that you should grow fond of Isabel and the children; so that our home would really seem home to you when you learned the right you had to it. Isabel is very deeply attached to you—your little brother and sister like you—here is your home, my darling—in our hearts!"

"I cannot paint to you the dismay and dread I have felt when you have prattled to me, with such sweet eloquence, of your dead soldier-father. I feared that you could never reconcile yourself to me. Dearest, I am no hero. I fought desperately for years; when I saw my dear brother dead on the field, when I knew the cause defeated, bitter rage and pain, bitter mortification and despair seized me—I had not the courage to face defeat, poverty, the loss of kindred—I fled the country. I wronged your mother by my flight. Heaven knows I have repented that. It is too late to atone to her; but to her child I can prove my love. Everything your heart craves shall be yours, dear Claire. I have won riches beside which the estates of Belle-Rivière are a mere bagatelle. This home is yours, to share with Isabel."

They sat until the early June morning began faintly to pale the lights in the lusters overhead, talking of the past. Claire was far too excited to sleep, and had a thousand questions to ask.

"You really must be going to bed, my daughter; you look pale and tired. Just think of all you have lived through this night—that trying opera!—but my daughter will never appear upon the stage again! You were beautiful and wonderful, my dear; but now you will keep that sweet voice to delight your friends,"—he kissed her on the forehead and sent her off to her cool, airy chamber, furnished with an Oriental and almost fabulous luxury.

Claire felt as little as ever like sleep when she found herself alone. She went to the open window. The dawn was growing; a bird was waking in the wisteria that climbed up toward her casement—she thought of a time, now more than a year ago, when she had crouched at this hour on the steps of that neighboring house, waiting for news of life or death. Ah! how she had loved that man!

She was his equal now in social standing—richer than he—loved, petted, cherished. Her father had said to her that she should "have every wish of her heart." Vain promise! Could he give her that love for which she had pined?

"I will try to be happy," she said, with a sob, throwing herself on her knees beside her bed. "I have so much to think of—his grandfather, for! Dear little Julien and Dodo! Dear Isabel and my mother!—and I must give me a grateful heart!"

Her prayers soothed her and quieted the almost wild excitement of her heart. Presently she was wrapped in her soft nightgown, like a little white moth in its silken cocoon, and lying asleep on her pillow.

When she awoke it was quite late—full ten o'clock. Olla had drawn a small table to her bedside, on which she had placed several things—a large bunch of lovely flowers as fresh as if just brought in from the garden at the cottage; and a jewel case disclosing, when Claire opened it, a full set of pink pearls and diamonds, even to the aigrette for the hair, and a card on which was written, "With Isabel's love."

Over the foot of the bed lay an exquisite morning-dress, all India-mul, lace, blue-stain ribbon! Verily, it was easy for the little concert singer to realize that she was a rich man's daughter!

A perfumed bath was ready for her in her dressing-room; after that, Olla came in and brushed out her long, fine, wavy hair and arranged it simply to match the India-mul dress; and choosing the choicest flowers for her belt, Claire went down to the morning-room where her family were waiting impatiently to welcome her—little Dodo—my Julien—her beautiful step-mother—her own dear father. A gay morning they made of it—a festival!

Claire felt like an ingrate because that dull ache would not leave her heart—such a dull heavy pain, when she ought to have spirits light as a feather.

"Father," she said, after a time, "you did not tell me what had become of that man—Vaudrey—whom you denounced at Belle-Rivière."

"I will tell you in a day or two, Claire. Let us have nothing unpleasant to think of on this grand day of high festival."

About twelve o'clock a footman knocked at the door; he gave his master a card, who went into the drawing-room to receive his guest. In a few minutes he returned, and taking Claire's hand, said, smilingly:

"Come, my daughter, you will have to be introduced to all my friends now. One of my most intimate friends is in the drawing-room and has asked particularly to see you. Don't be jealous, madame!" to Isabel, who laughed and shook her head.

"I am afraid this will be a trial to me," said Claire, a little shyly, as she followed her father; but, on the threshold, he gravely kissed her, gave her a gentle push into the room and closed the door, himself remaining outside.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHY HE ASKED HER.

"Yes," I answered you, last night;

"No," this morning, sir, I say.

—MRS. BROWNING.

WHEN Aubrey Chayce leaped through the window at Belle-Rivière and took his place by Elsie's side, he was actuated by an impulse as manly and noble as ever moved a young man to a rash act—for it was an impulse utterly unselfish, purely chivalric! He did not love her—never expected to love another than the pale girl who had turned from him in silent scorn, two days before—but he pitied her, "and pity is akin to love." He knew her intense pride—how spoiled, how petted she had been—how she had deemed herself of better clay than the world in general—and he grieved to think how utterly crushed she was, what a hard life was before her, and how even he must add to her humiliation by having refused the adoration she had so girlishly given him. The impulse to become her protector was as natural as it would have been to rush forward had he seen her in physical danger. And, since only as her husband, could he shield, soothe, provide for her, he asked her to become his wife. And Elsie had clung to him, flung her head on his shoulder, and smiled.

"Dear Aubrey, how good, how noble you are!" "Not good or noble, Elsie—far from it—but anxious to be your friend. You know I have always been fond of you. That I love one woman better than any thing else in this world, even you, I do not deny. I never loved until I met the one you heard me talking with under the oleanders. She has refused me; I had not thought to marry; but, Elsie, if you will be my wife, I promise you my tenderest friendship and regard."

Elsie, with her head on his bosom, looked out from under her drooping eyelashes at her father, where he sat, dark and silent, by his desk; then, suddenly, with a scream, she darted out of Aubrey's arms and rushed to snatch the weapon which her father had stealthily taken up—looking another way and apparently unconscious that he was handling it—and aimed at his own breast!

She was not a second too soon; her shriek and movement caused his hand to swerve as he pulled the trigger, and the ball flew harmlessly out of the window. The next instant Rex had wrested the revolver from him.

"None of that," he said, sternly. "If I spare your life and your liberty, it is not for you to trifle with them. Have you no real love for the daughter you have professed so much for?"

"God knows that it is to save her shame that I would put myself out of the way."

"And add another to her terrible griefs! No, man, give me your word—swear, by the child who hears your oath—that you will make no further attempt upon your life."

"If I must—I swear," was the sullen response.

Elsie was on her father's knee, her arms about his neck, her cheek to his.

"My darling," he whispered in her ear, "now is your opportunity! Say 'yes,' to Aubrey, and I shall

feel that I have not quite ruined your life. Say yes, yes, a thousand times, yes! He is rich, he is generous, he is a sort of dreamer up there at the North—if you were his wife it would not matter what became of me! Why, Elsie, my pet, this is your royal opportunity."

Elsie lifted her cheek from his and looked full in his eyes. Again he drew her down and whispered: "And it will be my salvation too! Don't you see? This fellow, here, thinks the world and all of Aubrey—will he punish Aubrey's father-in-law! If my pet cares for her poor father she will save him and secure her own happiness."

"Yes, papa. I understand. Yet—I would like a night to think it over."

"Strange you should hesitate a second, Elsie!"

"Is it strange?" she asked, with a melancholy smile. "Well, I shall take a night to think of it, despite of its being strange."

In one hour Elsie had sprung from childhood into womanhood. Thoughts pressed upon her—the revelation of her father's true character gave her a sudden wisdom. She felt keenly, painfully, that in urging her to accept Aubrey he was thinking neither of her or Aubrey's real happiness, but of his own personal welfare. She rebelled against his selfishness. It was a time to try of what sort her pride was; whether it were vanity, imperious willfulness—or a self-respect such as ennobles its owner.

She slipped from her father's knee and stood up, looking at Rex and Aubrey with a queenly air.

"Leave us alone, one night, gentlemen—one night more in dear Belle-Rivière, and in the morning I will give Mr. Chayce my answer to his proposition."

"She is wise to ask for time. Will you spend the night at our cottage, Aubrey? Very well; we will call in the morning at ten. Meantime, I leave you, sir, here, on parole," to Vaudrey.

The servants, in ignorance of what had occurred, served the usual liberal dinner, which Vaudrey washed down with more than the usual quantity of green-seal. He had gotten over his desire to commit suicide, eating and drinking with reckless extravagance of quantity; while his brain was so busily working at the problem of what he was to do that he scarcely noticed the amazed and disapproving glances of his daughter.

It was twilight when the dinner-hour was over. Vaudrey called for plenty of wax-candles in the library; then, coming out on the gallery where Elsie was slowly walking, he kissed her on the brow.

"I will say good-night, now, my darling; for I shall have to work late and long. Letters to be destroyed, the accounts of the estate to go over, papers to put in order—I have much to do."

"Good-night, papa"—her tone was listless, almost cold—this father was not the one she had so worshipped, and her feelings were undergoing an extraordinary change.

Late and long Elsie walked the starlit gallery where the soft air was heavy with the breath of silver jasmine-flowers: it was after midnight when she entered the hall, and saw, beneath the library-door, stream out a ray of light showing that her father was still there.

Meantime Rex, that evening, had much to communicate to his friend. First and foremost, what we know, that he was no other than Victor Laselle, that Claire was his dearly-loved daughter—second, that Claire had turned with contempt from Aubrey there in the summer-house, because she believed him to be a married man.

"She loves you only too well; she has fled from her friends to hard work and distant scenes, because she felt it her duty to struggle against her feelings. I tell you this, Aubrey, simply that you may make no mistake. It was a manly impulse which prompted you to say what you did to Elsie; yet, I cannot but hope she will have the pride and judgment to refuse you. Think not, she will be unprotected or unprovided for, if she will let me do for her what I wish. She, too, shall be my daughter, if she can make up her mind to live apart from that scoundrel, her father."

"It is almost cruel of you to tell me this now, Rex. I cannot take back what I have said to Elsie. Our future rests with her."

Through the fresh morning, between the hedges of Cherokee roses, the two gentlemen rode back to Belle-Rivière.

Elsie met them on the porch, with a scrap of paper in her hand which she gave to Rex. She was very pale, and there were great black shadows under her eyes; but her smile was sweet and tender as she gave Aubrey a searching look—plainly she saw his pallor, the nervousness he could not hide under the air of bright anticipation—then, turning again to Rex, while the trouble came back into her young face, she said:

"I did not believe my father would prove so dishonorable. I am as angry with him as you can possibly be."

The scrap of paper she had found on the library table when she went down to breakfast, directed to her, and saying:

"Farewell, perhaps for long years, my daughter. I have thought best to cut the knot of all difficulties, by going to parts unknown. Such a course will save you mortification and vexation. As the wife of Aubrey Chayce, you will be amply provided for; so, as I am utterly penniless, I take your mother's jewels and money—20,000 dollars in registered bonds—which were willed to you, but which, I am sure, you will not begrudge me, under the circumstances. I shall also take Pierre, who belongs to me, if I can get at him without waste of time. I am not used to waiting on myself, and his services will be invaluable. Farewell, my darling. I know that you will be happy and a great lady—this will comfort me in my exile. Your unfortunate FATHER."

"I shall not tell him," said Rex, looking at his watch. "He will flourish by his wits somewhere. I can easily believe. That he has abandoned you, Elfine, makes it easier for me—"

"Hush, Rex, my friend," interposed Aubrey, as if anxious to be first in the field. "Not a word, until I hear from her own lips whether she consents to be my wife."

"Never—never!" said Elfine, her young face lighted up with glorious resolution, albeit her red-rose lips trembled a little. "I have thought and thought, and I am perfectly certain, Aubrey, that my pride is not of a kind that will stoop to accept of pity instead of love. I should never be content—I should make your life a purgatory by my jealousy—and I should be still more wretched. I bless you and honor you—and will try to be a sister to you—but I will not marry you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COME TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

When the happy Yes falters from her lips,
Pass and blush the news o'er the blowing ships.
—TENNYSON.

Her newly-found father gently pushed Claire into the great drawing-room and closed the door. The light came with a soft, subdued glow through thick satin curtains of golden topaz, and at first, the pale fair girl—standing there with her heart beating somewhat faster from wonder and a growing excitement—saw only the gleaming statues, the rare pictures, the great mirror over the carved ebony mantle, the tall Japanese vases under it, the luxurious couches tempting to day-dreams, the exquisite tapestry of the chairs and sofas. As she remained by the door, her heart throbbing, the blood palpitating in rosy waves through her suddenly-flushed cheeks—for she felt his presence before she saw him—Aubrey Chayce, who had been standing by a window, turned and came slowly toward her, holding out his hand.

At first Claire shrunk and grew pale again; but, almost instantly, she forced herself to give him her hand.

"Are you well—happy?" he asked her, with a thrill in his voice which she felt to her soul's core.

"Yes, both well—and happy. And you, Mr. Chayce?—but I need not ask you. I saw you—and your wife—at the opera last night."

He smiled ever so faintly, and his smile made her indignant; he had kept hold of her hand, but she drew it away.

"I am very happy," she persisted, a little hurriedly. "Doubtless you know, before I did, Mr. Chayce, that I have a father. I was only told last night. And I loved him so well—he had won my regard before—and it scarcely surprised me so very much as one would suppose. I am accustomed to the thought already; and I am so fortunate—so very fortunate! I have everything in the world the most exacting could crave!—Isabel, the dear children, my noble father. Yes, indeed, I am happy."

Still the smile grew in the eyes that looked down on her. "How you sung last night," he said; "it was wonderful!"

"Did your wife think so?" she asked, looking proudly at him.

"My wife? I did not ask her, little Claire. I should first of all things have to find her."

"Have to find her?"

"To find my wife—yes. I did not dream there was a woman in the world who had done me the honor to accept that title."

She began to flush and tremble.

"I do not understand you," she said. "I dislike a jest when I am in serious mood. In truth, I wish my father had not left me to entertain you, Mr. Chayce, for I fear you will find me dull."

"Perhaps," he responded. "That will depend entirely on your answer to the one question I came here to ask you. Claire, little Claire, my dove, my darling, my lily, do you think I could laugh at you? Do you think I am a married man? You are mistaken. Elfine will tell you, some day, how near I came to being her husband, and why I came near making that grave mistake—but I am free—free to love my own true love! Free to wed the 'lily maid,' if I can ever hope to win her sweet consent. Speak to me, Claire; tell me you have not meantime learned to love another!—tell me again, as you told me under the oleanders, that you love me. Three cruel months have passed since then."

"Three eternities could not have changed my feelings, Aubrey. But—I cannot believe it—I am in doubt—am dizzy with the rush of many thoughts. Oh, Aubrey, are you telling me the truth?"

"Ask your father; he knows all. Look in my eyes, Claire, and see what *they* say to you."

His blue eyes shone with such a bold, bright joy that her own were quite abashed and sunk before that blaze of exultant light.

"Sweet story-teller," he laughed, catching her in his arms. "So, you were entirely happy?—you had all you craved?"

"All I dared to crave," she added, with a blush.

"Oh! You made a mental reservation! I shall kiss you three times for a punishment. And I shall never let you out of my arms until you have promised to be my own sweet wife—and that as soon as possible. Now—do you agree?"

She drew the ruby ring from its warm, fragrant hiding-place, and giving it to him, held up her small white satin-soft hand; he slipped the jewel on her engagement-finger—and Claire was his betrothed.

A swift, sweet hour all to themselves, and then Rex—as we must call him to the last—summoned them to luncheon; and there the happy pair received the felicitations of madame and the two

bright children—and of Elfine!—Elfine, who was an adopted daughter of that luxurious home—who had been in an adjoining chamber the previous night, having arrived first and kept purposely out of the way, to humor Rex's whim for a grand surprise; Elfine, who had, in three months' desperate struggle, come out conqueror over herself and learned to look on Aubrey as a dear brother. There was no deceit in the kiss of congratulation she gave Claire—only one little sharp pang as she saw how Aubrey's face shone and how satisfied he was.

"And you were here last night!" cried Claire.

"Yes," answered Elfine, with her old, witching laugh, "and had to devour my exquisite supper in solitude!"

"You shall have your reward," said Rex, placing by her plate a great bunch of roses. "Come, friends, fill your glasses; here's to the future!—may it be brighter than the past."

That meal was a joyous family festival.

And when Mr. Light came to dinner, that evening, and saw the fairy world which had opened to the young singer, it was not difficult to persuade him that he had lost "a rising star."

The three months which had elapsed since Rex declared war against Louis Vaudrey, and that scoundrel had taken to flight—liberating Pierre from the guard-house as he had threatened, and the two riding away on the two finest horses in the stable, to take to the river-boat from some obscure landing—had been passed by Rex in getting the affairs of Belle-Rivière in perfect order, and making plans for the development of the adjoining plantation. He knew that Claire was where she was and he allowed events to take their course until he was ready to come North. A love affair is always something which will not bear much interference from third persons, and he felt sure this one would come right in time.

Aubrey Chayce had gone North, after two or three weeks spent in Florida; but had been ignorant of Claire's whereabouts, until she had appeared in the summer opera, which had been on but three or four nights before Rex and his family—including Elfine with her maid Phyllis—arrived.

Rex could not lavish enough of luxury and the dress and jewels girls prize, on Claire and Elfine. No hasty wedding, either, for his daughter!—time to have the silver-and-gilt services hammered out in *à la pouce* work, the dinner-set decorated in Limoges, the toilets elaborated by Worth!

The young fashionables of the city—such as he deemed worthy of the honor—were introduced to the Lasclles by Mr. Chayce. One of his friends—an elegant young gentleman of leisure—was chosen to be first groomsman; a choice which threw him much into the fascinating society of the brilliant Southern girl, who was chief bridesmaid, and which eventually proved that a girl's first love is not always her last!

There was a wedding last autumn of such magnificent accessories as are seldom seen even in gay, extravagant New York; and one of the lovely bride's most earnest well-wishers was Big Flannigan, whom little Claire had far from forgotten, and who had a snug house and a paying business of his own, thanks to her gratitude for the kind protection he had given the little chorus-singer.

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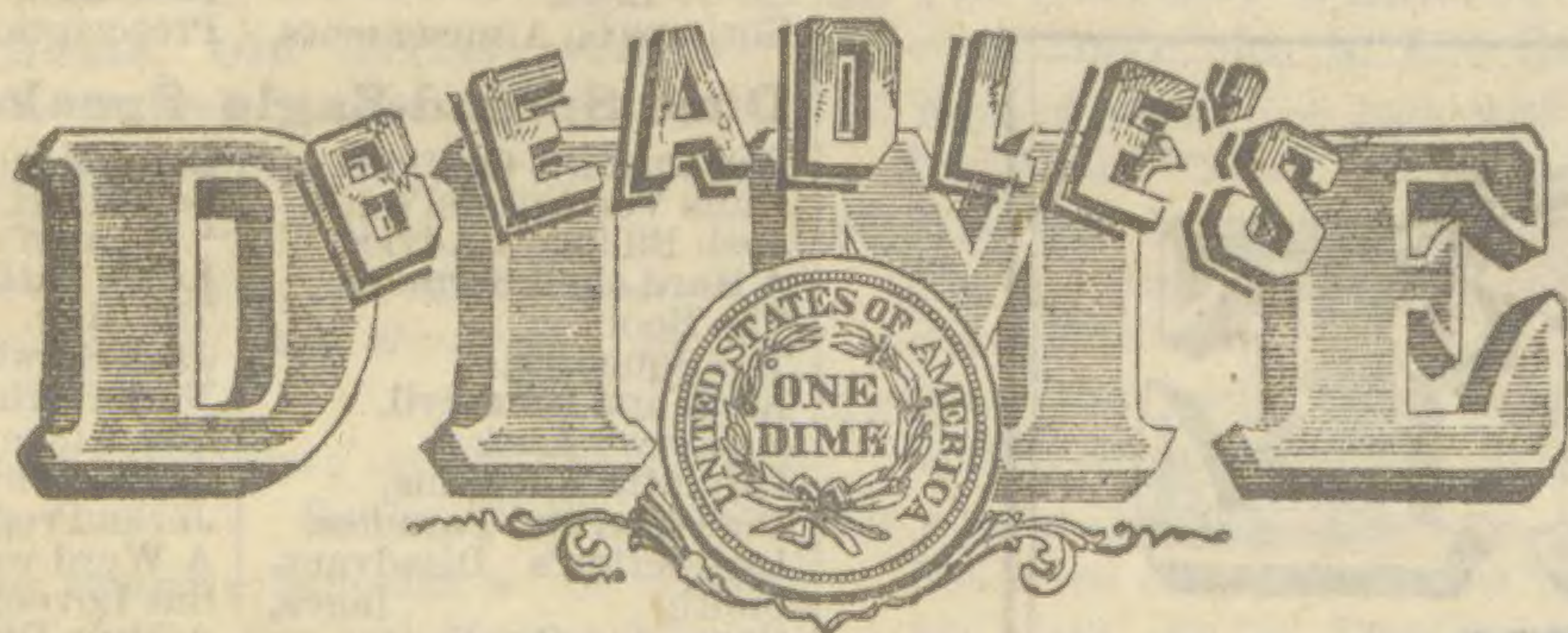


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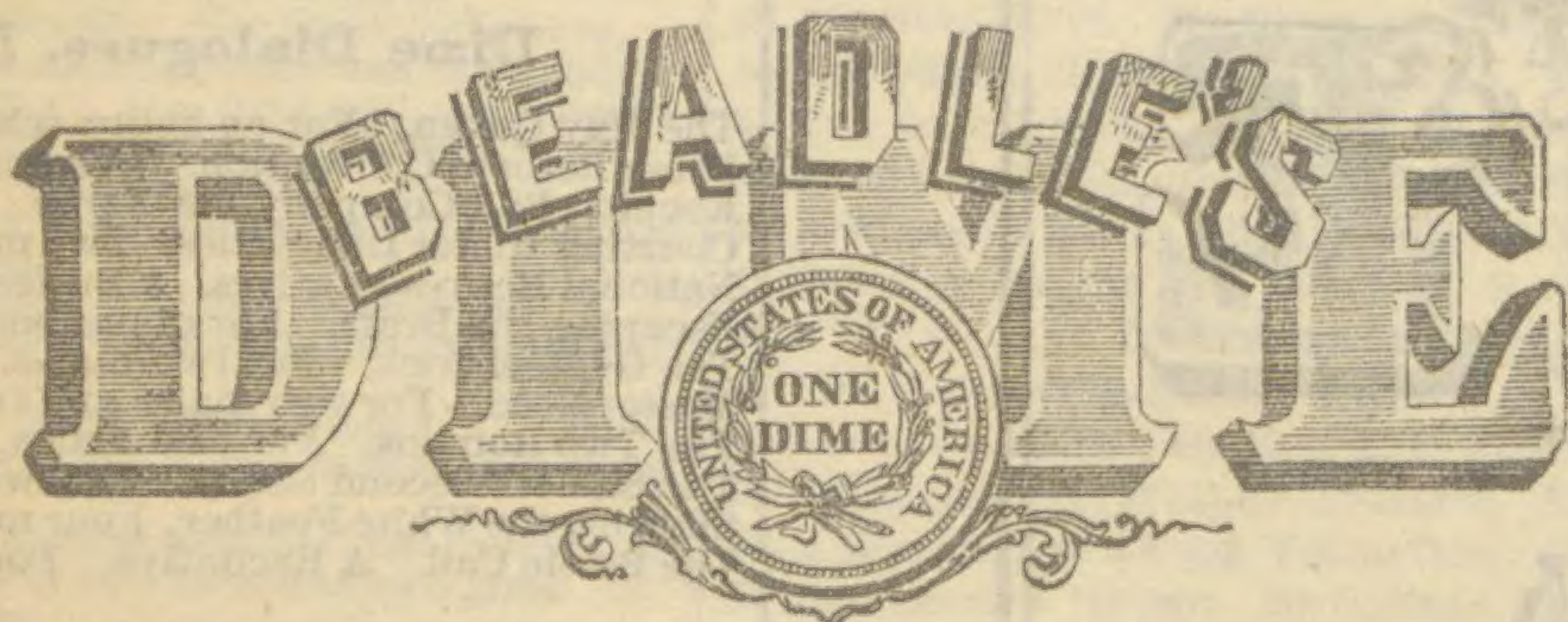
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